



ZEE SHINE STORM

DREAMHAVEN DUET #1

The

Stable
Boy

THE WORLD WAS MY HELL AND
SHE RULED IT LIKE *the devil.*

The Stable Boy

Dreamhaven Duet (#1)

Zee Shine Storm

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Author's Note

Dear Reader,

Thank you for picking up this book. It was a tough one to write emotionally and may be a tough read for some as well so please be mindful of the trigger/content warnings.

The Dreamhaven Duet is a loose retelling of the classics 'Oliver Twist' and 'The Count of Monte Cristo' consisting of reverse bully romance and rich girl/poor boy trope in Book 1 followed by a vengeance plot and HEA in Book 2. Book 1 ends on a cliffhanger and features a hero suffering from mutism and 17 y.o MCs but with 18+ content.

The story is told using first person dual POV although a few chapters are in 3rd person as I believed it was necessary to set the tone for some of the scenes. I have written this story with teenage protagonists in mind and therefore, you may find their characteristics or mindset similar to most seventeen year olds.

Apart from the mentioned triggers and mutism, 'The Stable Boy' closely explores the concept of 'conditioning' with regards to the main characters. Conditioning, in psychology, is

a behavioral process whereby a response becomes more frequent or predictable in a given environment as a result of reinforcement.

Safety wise, there are non-explicit OW and OM scenes in this book after the H and h have met because they are important for the development of the plot. The H and h do not cheat on each other though.

Hope you enjoy your reading. Please do consider leaving a review after and if you do, it is my humble request that you refrain from giving away the ending as a spoiler.

Zee.

Blurb

Paige

We called him the stable boy. Dad took him out of foster care and brought him to our farm because it meant free labor. I didn't know his name. Didn't want to.

You know what else I didn't want?

I didn't want to notice him as he eventually grew out of that lanky frame and got...hot. I didn't want thoughts of him invading my brain when I was on dates with my boyfriend. I didn't want to care when he looked like he needed to say something so badly but couldn't.

Because he was mute. He couldn't speak even if his life depended on it. And after making that same life a living hell for him all these years, I didn't want to face the fact that he might never forgive me.

Oliver

Why didn't they ever say it? Why didn't they ever say my name? I ached to hear it sometimes instead of the usual phrases like 'stable boy' and 'dumb kid'. In their eyes, that was all I was. Because of what? My disability?

And her...

My tormentor. My foster father's daughter who never got off her high horse. What did I ever do to her? Why did she hate me so much?

Even when I treated her with kindness.

Even when I helped her out with things.

Even when tears gathered in my eyes and I wanted to tell her to stop because I didn't deserve to be bullied but words wouldn't come out of my mouth.

The world was my hell and she ruled it like the devil. And the worst part of it all was that...I let her.

TW: This book contains themes and situations pertaining to slavery, abuse, bullying, sexual assault, trauma and disability discrimination. Reader discretion is advised.

To Nedra Atkinson.

This entire duet is dedicated to you. Thank you for your continuous support and for lending inspiration to this passion project of mine.

Prologue

“Wow, Scott. Out of all the kids you could have chosen, you had to bring home some dumb-”

“Rachel. We don’t need him to speak, honey. We just need him to be able to handle the workload without having to pay for labor. He was the strongest one there amongst others his age.”

Rachel Hamilton let out a snort and banged a pot against the sink, causing the other three people in the room to flinch.

“I’m not letting him stay here. This is so like you, Scott. You didn’t even think to ask for my opinion on this.”

She walked away in a huff and her husband followed her, trying to placate her with words of reassurance.

“He can stay in the barn, honey.”

“I’ve already sorted everything out with the social worker.”

“Imagine how much money we would save, not hiring a farm hand.”

“I did this for us.”

There was a beat of silence, some shuffling upstairs and then the creaking of a bed in a lazy, rhythmic manner began while the two kids sat in the living room below and stared at each other.

The boy, his eyes blank and yet so soulful, a mop of dark brown, wavy hair on his head and his clothes plain and simple. He was just twelve years old, abruptly snatched away from his routine at the foster care unit in Cedarfield and brought to Dreamhaven mere minutes ago by a man who had so casually bribed the social worker.

The girl, a few months younger, studied him curiously, her grey eyes assessing and a little excited.

“Are you going to be my brother?” was the first thing she asked him after she was done scrutinizing him.

He frowned at her because for some reason, that just sounded so wrong.

The noises above grew louder all of a sudden and the boy’s eyebrows pinched together even more before he shifted his gaze towards the ceiling and then looked away quickly.

“They’re having sex,” the girl explained unnecessarily, biting her lip. “People do it when they get married, you know.” She paused and regarded him with wide eyes.

His chest rose and fell in a slow breath while he kept his gaze averted.

“I’m going to go tell Rayne about you,” the girl announced cheerfully. “You can come play with us later. Oh and the stables aren’t very warm all the time, just so you know. Winter is coming,” she added that last part in an ominous tone but he only regarded her blankly.

She sighed. “Well, this sucks. I thought I would at least have someone to talk to but you’re just being so weird right now,”

she mumbled. "I guess I'll see you around," she threw over her shoulder as she walked away.

She disappeared after a few seconds while the boy was forced to sit and endure the shamelessness of his *foster parents* upstairs. Did they think he was some imbecile who had no clue what was going on or what?

A minute later, Scott Hamilton appeared at the foot of the stairs, still adjusting his clothes while his wife brushed past him to enter the kitchen once more, a flush on her pale cheeks.

"You boy," he spoke in a no-nonsense tone. "You'll have far more comforts here than you ever did at that overcrowded rat nest so you better keep your mouth shut if anyone gets too nosy and decides to check up on you."

He stopped and clamped his lips together in amusement when he realized that the warning was more or less redundant given the kid's disability.

"Right," he said to himself before looking important. "I'll set you up in the barn. You'll wake up at sunrise every day and see to all the chores Simon gives you before expecting any meals. Is that clear?"

The boy simply looked at him, expressionless and mute, to which Scott Hamilton scowled in response.

"You could at least nod if you cannot speak, boy," he snapped. "What, they didn't teach you sign language in foster care? No meals if you don't work. And also, stay away from my daughter. Do we understand each other or not?"

Slowly, without letting his growing disgust and resentment show, the boy nodded at him.

Scott seemed satisfied with that and turned to walk into the kitchen to talk to his wife about something.

“Get rid of him,” the boy heard her say.

“I will, honey. Give me a minute. I just got here. And you wore me out.” His voice dropped to a murmur and Rachel let out a giggle.

There were some lustful kissing sounds that lasted longer than was appropriate before Scott finally reappeared.

“Come on, boy. Let’s go.”

He strode out of the house and the kid got up to trail him reluctantly, sadness weighing heavy on his heart but his mind screaming the words that he could never quite bring himself to speak.

Oliver. My name...is Oliver.

...

It started just a few days after he came to the farm.

She would be playing outside or simply lingering near the paddock and ask him to play with her. He wanted to. He really did but the overseer, Simon had made it clear that he was to do his share of the chores by sundown and there was just so much of it so the boy shook his head at her to decline her offer.

She would frown at him and huff out a breath before turning and stalking back into the house. He'd watch her go while still grazing the horses, feeling miserable and wishing he was able to call her back.

And then she stopped bothering to ask him anything. Maybe she thought he was ignoring her. For weeks, she left him alone while he spent his days working until his muscles grew sore and his nights were soaked in loneliness.

One day, the boy went to her house to drop off a package at the back door with Mrs. Hamilton and Paige had been sitting at the kitchen table doing her homework. When she glanced up at him, her cheeks went pink for some reason before she made a face at him and looked away.

He forced himself to stop staring and leave but when he went to bed that night, he thought about her for a long time, the way she had looked at him; her grey eyes wide and beautiful, her lips so pink and pretty. His dick had begun to harden the more he focused on those things and horrified, he shut out such ideas and mentally scolded himself to go to sleep.

A week after that, she actually came to the barn and brought her rich friends along with her. The boy stood by, feeling a little bewildered, until the one she called Rhys started sneering at him and shoved him against a stall. He didn't fight back because they were her friends and he was sure she would tell her father who would then have another excuse to punish him. The other guy, Devon, went up to the loft and trashed the boy's belongings calling him names like *dumbass* and *retard*.

Oliver wasn't even sure why this was happening at first and he hated the tears that sprang to his tears. He never asked for

any of it. He never tried to hurt them in any way. Why did she bring them to the only place which he felt like he could call his own?

It became a regular thing after that. They'd come to the farm in the weekends, deliberately seek him out and try to come up with creative ways to joke about his speechlessness and she took the most pleasure in it. Her laughter, which was so adorable and happy before, became cruel. Her gaze, which had been curious and friendly, became cold and condescending. And her words cut like the sharpest knife.

But once, she hurt her ankle when she was learning how to ride a horse and he was the one who bandaged it up for her. They were around fourteen then. He was on his heels before her while she sat on a bale of hay and watched him silently as he treated her ankle. He thought she would want to be his friend after that or at least realize that he meant her no harm. But she rolled her eyes at him and shoved his hand away before calling him a *weirdo* and limping off to the house.

After a couple of years, the boy gave up.

He gave up expecting that this would ever stop. That she would one day learn not to be unkind to him. That she might tell her friends to leave him alone. Because none of it got better. It got worse, in fact. The older he grew, the more she seemed to hate him.

On her sixteenth birthday, she hosted a party in the barn and had her boyfriend kick him out. The boy slept outside for the first few hours of that evening, under the stars and then one of the girls from her group came over to him and gave him a slice of cake accompanied by a sweet smile.

It was the first act of kindness he had received from anyone and it touched him for a second until Paige came stalking out and started yelling at the girl, telling her that the expensive cake was not for dogs before she bent to take the plate away only to dump it next to him on the ground.

The wound she gave him that night ached longer than the others had. To be so petty as to take the cake while he was halfway through eating it and tossing it away instead of letting him finish. He cried a lot that night. He didn't know why it hurt so bad when he was supposed to be used to her treatment. But his heart yearned for her regardless because even after all of that, he still thought about her. He still wanted her. He still found her beautiful and fascinating and he still remembered that little girl who had wanted him to be her friend that first time when he'd been brought to her home.

What she wasn't aware of was that every single day, he regretted saying no to her in the past when she had asked him to play with her. But on the night of her birthday party, something between them broke in a way that neither of them could hope to fix. His world went from dreary to dark and desolate.

Like that prison cell he had read about in one of his sad books as a child.

Chapter One

Paige

“Rhys, stop. Hey...I said stop, you moron!”

With a groan of frustration, my boyfriend rolled off me to drag his fingers through his hair and stare up at the ceiling.

“Don’t you *ever* dare touch me without my permission again!” I snapped at him, climbing out of bed and turning to glare at him. “I’m not in the mood right now okay.”

His cheeks puffed out as he exhaled and he got up as well, throwing me a snarky glance. “Don’t be so dramatic, Paige,” he said before picking up his jacket. “You know every girl in school would kill to be you right now?”

I rolled my eyes. And that means I should let him do whatever he wanted with me as a show of gratitude?

“I could say the same,” I told him with a hand on my hip. “About every guy in school.”

Rhys studied me silently as the seconds dragged by before he grinned and strode over to me to plant a kiss on my cheek.

“You’re so cute when you’re pissed off, baby,” he crooned. I gasped when the guy grabbed my ass and squeezed before

letting me go and walking out with a wink thrown my way.
“You’ll be in the mood soon enough. Know where to find me.”

I squinted at the doorway of my bedroom, wishing I could throw something at the back of his head. He had deliberately done that after I had told him not to touch me and it made me so mad. My boyfriend of three years, my friend since we were twelve, totally fit the stereotype of arrogant, self-absorbed rich kid. I don’t know what I ever saw in him.

With a sigh, I walked over to my window to open it because it was getting quite hot for five pm in the afternoon. Dragging my sweater up over my head to fling it aside, I stood there in just my bra and jeans and looked outside, half hidden behind the white, lace curtains.

The sun was so bright, its golden rays showering the entire farm with warmth. I stood high up and surveyed all that belonged to me. Every animal, every structure, the quarters in the distance where some of our workers lived, the vast grounds and vegetation and...the barn.

When my eyes fell on the paddock towards the left, I narrowed them slightly. He was sitting on top of the fence, his boot-clad feet braced between the slats and his hands gripping one of those dog-eared, old novels he sometimes liked to look at on those *extremely* rare occasions when he finished his chores early. Two of our horses were grazing just a few feet away from him and from time to time, he would lift his head and watch them before resuming his pretentious reading.

I wanted to turn away from the window but I couldn’t. These were my stolen, shameful moments when I could look at him as much as I wanted without making him aware of the fact.

When I could satisfy my curiosity from a distance and study every movement, every expression of his. I didn't even know what I was searching for. Things which he could not say maybe.

At twelve years old, my father, Scott Hamilton, had brought him home under the guise of fostering him. We had not been rich then and our farm had needed labor for its upkeep. My dad and Simon made the boy work from dawn till dusk until he learned all the ropes and did almost everything. Over the following months after his arrival, our farm started doing really well and we were able to hire more workers and expand.

But we didn't pay him. He was supposed to be grateful that we had given him a place to stay and fulfilled his basic needs, my father said. He owed it to us for taking him out of the system and giving him a life here. As far as the social workers were concerned, my father was now rich enough to bribe each and every one of them into looking the other way.

The boy who was made to live in the stables didn't protest or complain. How could he? He had a disability and couldn't talk.

Dad never even told us what his name was so I got used to calling him *the stable boy*. My father taught me how to remind the boy of his place if he ever seemed as though he was stepping out of line. But...he never did. He stayed in his place, in the barn. Only came to the house if there was a task required of him. He hardly even hung out with the other workers and every night, I watched his window in the loft light up with a tiny, yellow light while he sat and ate alone.

I was seventeen now and able to think for myself, away from my parents' constant influence and slowly, I was starting to realize that they had been wrong all these years. That I had been wrong for bullying him every single opportunity I got, to show him where he belonged and who was boss around here. I had laughed and taunted and shunned him until my friends followed my example as well. Except for Rayne, my best friend. She never made fun of him because the girl was a saint.

His head lifted from the book once more but he didn't look at the horses this time. Instead, he looked directly at me.

I didn't have the presence of mind to duck out of sight for a few seconds and as our gazes locked from across the distance, I licked my lips and felt my breathing turn shallow.

He had grown up so nice. If girls stopped focusing on his disability and status, they would be falling over themselves to date him. He was the most handsome seventeen year old in the entire town of Dreamhaven. But the fact that I never stopped spreading rumors about how he hardly bathed and had really gross habits kept all of them away as well despite their admiration of his good looks.

A trickle of sweat slid down to my cleavage and I finally stepped aside to press my back against the wall and close my eyes. I couldn't get his face out of my head and I hated that so much.

I was dating the guy all the girls in my school were crazy about and here I was secretly checking out the stable boy. Someone who probably hated me and plotted my murder every living minute. The things I had done and said to him in these

past five years... The number of times I had brought him to tears.

And yet, I couldn't stop behaving this way because I didn't want to feel anything for him. I wished he would stop being so nice for once and just react. Get mad at me and show some aggressiveness. Make me feel like my treatment was justified so that I wouldn't spend my days feeling like scum.

But he did none of that and the guilt turned me inside out sometimes. I was his bully and that's what I would always be. It was wishful thinking to hope for his forgiveness.



Chapter Two

Oliver

I smelled like shit. That was what you got from spending the whole day outdoors with animals and then ending it by mucking out stalls and making sure they did not roll in their own filth at nights. I was bone-tired and just wanted to crash in my bed but a shower was badly needed.

It was hot tonight and my clothes clung to me uncomfortably so stripping them off and stepping under the cool spray from the shower fixture downstairs in the stables was a much-needed relief. Simon could boss me around all day long but the evenings and nights were mine. A lot of times I asked myself why I didn't simply run away and save myself from all this ill-treatment and every single time the answer was the same.

Paige.

She had been watching me today and I wasn't sure for how long but it left me confused. Her boyfriend had just driven off and there she had been, topless and in plain view of me. I was used to her taunts and sneers, used to her arrogance and ignorance as well. But these days, she acted differently and I didn't know what to make of it.

I should have more of a backbone and be able to walk away by now. But I didn't because it was all I knew...this life...this bittersweet hell and loneliness.

I was a mute with no education and no qualifications. Where would I even go? What would I do? Another farm somewhere with a bunch of people who wouldn't be aware of my inability to speak at first and I would have to start over and adjust again? At least she was here. It didn't matter if she was out of my league and cruel. I still never started my days without catching a glimpse of her and never ended them before I was sure she was safely in her room at nights.

Besides, this was home and these horses were my friends. I had a cat named Ollie too. Not that the poor thing knew that because I couldn't say it out loud. One might wonder why I even bothered naming them at all. It was because I believed in the importance of a name. I believed it mattered no matter who or what you were. And even if I couldn't utter the words, I believed these creatures knew I had special names for them in my heart because animals were intuitive like that.

After I was done with my shower, I went upstairs to my loft, the only place in Dreamhaven which felt safe to me. Nobody bothered me here anymore or demanded things from me. Nobody cared what I did with the place as long as I kept things clean and running. I learned how to fix the plumbing a year after I came here and learned to fix the fuse a few months after that. Whatever broke was mended the day after.

And as for my sadness, I had a remedy for that too. As long as I worked myself to the point of exhaustion, I had no time to think or dwell on all the things that were wrong with my life.

It was the same deal every day but once I turned eighteen, I would be legally allowed to leave and I feared that day because I didn't know where I would end up. I didn't know if I would be able to say goodbye to the sheltered existence I had known for five years.

More importantly, I didn't know if I'd be able to say goodbye to her.

Sometime during the night, I felt something tickling my face and opened my eyes to find Ollie purring next to me, his green eyes glowing slightly. Absently, I caressed his neck and smiled. At least I had someone who thought my existence was meaningful. Turning on my side, I brought the cat close to my chest where he snuggled up and was soon asleep.

I understand what it's like, buddy, I silently communicated to my pet, my eyes slowly drifting close again. *I understand what it's like to be speechless.*

How that came to be was something I didn't want to remember. I'd been dumped into the foster care system at the age of ten and that was where I had stayed until Paige's father had decided to pick me to be his slave boy. One of the social workers had tried to teach me sign language but had gotten tired of my lack of response.

I didn't deal with people well. They made too much noise. After spending time around them, I always felt like it was just empty chatter. Like nobody had anything meaningful to say these days. It was either about money with the adults or social media and popularity with the teenagers. Things I didn't care about or couldn't relate to.

I sighed in the darkness and told myself to stop with the self-pity. This was what fate had dealt me with and I had to live with it. It was wishful thinking to hope for anything more.



Chapter Three

Paige

Rayne and I were in the kitchen the next afternoon doing our homework while my parents were out shopping. It was the last thing I was interested in but Dad had threatened to take away my generous allowance if I slacked off on schoolwork so I made the effort. Rayne helped me out a lot but the girl was made of stern stuff and refused to let me copy her work or do any of the assignments for me.

“You’re so mean,” I grumbled to her from across the kitchen table as I struggled with a particularly difficult Math problem.

“Bitch, I’m just trying to help you realize your own potential,” she drawled, scribbling something in her notebook. “You’re smart, Paige. Smart but *lazy*. I can’t fix that for you.”

I blew out a breath and got up to splash my face with some water. It was hot again today and I’d changed into a tank top and tiny shorts as soon as I had gotten home from school.

“Speaking of fixing things, this damned thing has been leaking since yesterday,” I said while looking at the tap over the kitchen sink. “Dad was supposed to have called someone to take care of it already.”

I twisted the tap tightly to make sure it was closed properly but the thing did a complete three sixty and water exploded uncontrollably out of the nozzle, splashing against the dishes in the sink and then all over the front of my top. Quickly, I tried to close it again but it was no use. The thing was broken now.

“You just made it worse,” my friend’s voice drifted over to me above the sound of the rushing water.

“Thank you, Rayne,” I replied loudly. *For pointing out the obvious.* “Ugh, this sucks! I’m going to go see if anyone’s around to come fix this.”

I strutted out of the house, feeling deeply inconvenienced by such matters because they were only adding to my frustration over the beef I already had with Math. After climbing down the porch steps, I squinted in the sudden brightness and looked around for someone to come and sort out the plumbing issue. I froze a little when my eyes landed on...*him.*

For a long minute, I just stood there and watched him carrying bales of hay into the stables, wondering why I was surprised that none of the other workers were around since he did most of the work around here anyway. I even debated going back inside but that idea was quickly abandoned when he turned and caught me staring.

Fortifying myself against the tumultuous feelings that arose in me nowadays whenever our eyes met, I stalked over to him and said, “Hey. Um...the kitchen in our tap broke. I need someone to fix it.”

Belatedly, I cringed on the inside when I realized what I had said but he only looked at me impassively. Good. Maybe, he

hadn't noticed my slip up. So I was just going to play it cool even if his attention was making me nervous for some reason.

I frowned and said, "Did you hear me? I need someone to fix the waterworks going off inside. Do you know anybody who can help?"

My heartbeats weren't quite regular and they grew even more erratic the longer we looked at each other. His eyes were brown. A deep, chocolate brown and so...intense. His hair, which was usually unruly, was matted to his head due to the sweat and his skin was really tanned as well from spending all those hours in the sun.

Before I could move on to admiring his firm body beneath the dusty, black t-shirt he wore, he brushed past me and headed towards the house, leaving a trail of musky odor in his wake. Jesus. Somebody really needed a bath. I followed him, making sure to keep my distance because I didn't want to get all that sweaty, horsey smell on me and watched him enter the kitchen through the side door before walking in myself.

Rayne was staring at the guy as he went about his task. He disappeared outside for a minute and the gushing water stopped eventually. It hadn't even occurred to me to switch off the main supply because I didn't even know where it was. When he came back in from the shed in my backyard, he was carrying a toolbox and a plastic package with fittings for the sink.

Okay. I felt stupid for having asked him earlier if he knew anyone who could help me when he obviously was an expert at this sort of thing.

One of the fittings slipped out of his grasp and when he bent to pick it up, his jeans stretching across his backside and the flash of skin his tight t-shirt revealed was kind of hard not to notice.

Rayne was still staring fixatedly so I cleared my throat to get her attention but my best friend simply turned to me and mouthed, 'Wow.'

I shook my head at her as she fanned herself a little and said out aloud, "Um...okay, so...I'm going to get out of here now. This kitchen's getting a little too stuffy for me. See you later, Paige."

She slipped out of her chair and was walking away before I could make sense of why she was deserting me when we had planned to study all afternoon.

"Bitch, don't leave me here," I hissed at her as I followed her to the front door and she grinned at me.

"If I were you, sweetie...", she said in a louder tone than was necessary, "...I would be taking advantage of this opportunity to get it on with stable boy on the kitchen table."

"Rayne, oh my god," I growled at her, feeling my face burn.

My traitor of a friend just threw me a kiss before walking out of the house. She knew I hated him. She knew that and yet...I don't know what came over her sometimes.

Heading back to the kitchen, I leaned against the counter behind him as I watched him work. Initiate awkward tension. When he was done, he turned around and gave me a look which I couldn't read. The table stood between us and Rayne's parting words came back to me, making me bite my lip.

My eyes widened when he stepped closer and he paused for a few seconds, giving me a weird look this time before grabbing a pen and one of my notebooks from the table and starting to scribble something.

That took my mind out of the gutter and made me curious. Wait, he actually knew how to write? That was a shocker. I leaned forward a little to read his words. The writing was untidy but I could make out what he had scribbled. A number saying plumber next to it and also a note that I should wait at least five minutes before opening the tap.

“Okay, that much I know,” I informed him in a snarky tone. “Of course, I’m not going to just open it right away. And what? You have a problem doing the work around here? Why do I even have to call the plumber now when I know you can take care of these things?”

The kitchen door opened suddenly and I jumped, thinking that maybe Rayne was back but it was just Simon, the man responsible for supervising all the workers, his large frame blocking out the light from the sun outside.

I felt the boy standing next to me tense and glanced his way to find his jaw clenched and eyes narrowed in suspicion. I was getting some really bad vibes from him for some reason.

“Paige,” Simon’s deep voice cut in and he scowled at us both. “What is he doing here? I noticed him come inside. Is there a problem?”

“Oh...um...I called him because the tap broke,” I explained. “He was just leaving.”

Simon's gaze shifted towards the sink then. "Did he fix it properly?" he asked in a skeptical manner and I wondered why he spoke as though the boy wasn't even there. "Tell him he can leave now. I'll just take another look to be sure."

I simply shrugged and waited but the boy did not move. I opened my mouth to dismiss him but couldn't say anything when I noticed the way he was staring at my chest. What the actual hell? My own gaze dropped and I flushed when I realized that my top was still wet and clinging to my skin. I wasn't wearing a bra so my tits and nipples were visible through the fabric.

Okay, now I was mad. I couldn't believe he had the audacity to look at me so openly and think that I would just be fine with it.

Again, I opened my mouth, this time to tell him off but Simon was the one who spoke up first.

"Boy, get out of here. There's a lot of work to be done outside," he snapped.

The boy still didn't move. He wasn't staring at my chest now but directly into my eyes and I had that feeling again. The feeling that he needed to say something but couldn't.

I almost asked him what it was but his eyes flicked to my chest once more and then towards Simon before coming back to my face.

And suddenly I understood. I understood what he was trying to convey to me through his eyes and his stance.

"Boy, didn't you hear me?" Simon demanded loudly and impatiently. "Get back to work."

I hugged myself a little before croaking out a lie. “Actually, I just remembered that Dad asked him to do some other chores around the house while he was gone. It’s okay, Simon.”

Simon didn’t look too pleased. I could only see his livid expression over stable boy’s shoulder. The boy kept himself in the middle of us, keeping me hidden from the neck down from Simon’s gaze.

The overseer huffed out a breath and grouched, “Make sure he doesn’t dawdle too much. He wastes a lot of time doing simple tasks.”

When Simon stomped out with that same angry expression, there was a beat of silence before I said, “He’s not like that, you know. I’ve known him all my life.”

The boy turned away and walked over to the door without responding.

“I’m assuming that’s what you meant, right?” I called out before he could leave. “You think Simon’s pervy.”

When he glanced back at me, I caught my breath at the shadows in his eyes, the deep sorrow which I could not begin to comprehend. I’d put that look on his face dozens of times in the past but this time, I knew it wasn’t there because of me. But before I could question him any further on that, he opened the door and was gone.

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## Chapter Four

### Oliver

Simon's pervy. Is that what the kids called it these days? Simon was the guy who had gotten away with raping one of the workers' daughters a couple of years ago because of his connections to Scott Hamilton and the mayor, men who carried the town's cops in the pockets of their trousers. Simon was also the man who felt that there was nothing wrong with copping a feel of a fourteen year old boy's dick in the corner of the stables when said boy was alone and had nobody to protect him. I'd put up with it exactly four times before I'd decided to risk punching him.

It had meant getting punched back and kicked in the stomach and being forced to go without a meal for two days but it had been worth it. He never touched me again.

As for Paige, I had no doubt she could hold her own but I still didn't want him anywhere near her. I didn't want him to even look at her the wrong way. Not that I was any better...

I closed my eyes and ran a hand through my hair, trying to focus on the book propped up against the desk lamp. *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens. It was another cherished favourite. I'd had these books since I was a kid and they were definitely the worse for wear but I still enjoyed reading them from time to time. It was like going back to a familiar place.

Ollie twisted around my ankles and ‘meowed’, letting me know that he was hungry. I didn’t have any money to buy food so I’d always just given him some of mine and he was used to it now. He didn’t have any preferences as long as his stomach was full. We were a lot alike in that sense as well.

I put down my half-eaten bowl of stew and he rushed to it immediately, diving into his dinner with enthusiasm. My eyes returned to the book but I couldn’t focus for some reason so I gave up and got up with a sigh, scratching Ollie’s ear to let him know I was going to go down for a bit. He shook me off as he ate and I smiled a little before descending the short ladder that led to the stables below.

Some of the horses neighed at my appearance while others slept on. I slipped out of the stables and took a long, deep breath as I stepped out into the night, the air cooler than it had been in the daytime.

Instinctively, my eyes went to her window. Her room faced the barn and it was always easy to tell if she was awake or not. It was almost eleven pm but the lights were off in her room so I assumed she was asleep. Or maybe she was out on a date with Rhys Walton.

Even as a kid, I had known they would end up together. She was always talking about him with her friends, sometimes even more when she knew I was within earshot. She called him the hottest guy ever, the boyfriend who made other girls envious of her, and even her best friend, Rayne, got this moon-struck look on her face whenever the Walton name came up.

I walked in on Paige kissing him in the stables back when we were fifteen and it gutted me. The worst part was that she kept

on doing it even when she noticed me come inside and her eyes were open the entire time. I should have moved away but I didn't and when she was done, she said, "Nice to know when the guy you're with is skilled with his tongue."

It was meant to be a taunt, just like everything else she said to me. The reference to a 'tongue' and all.

Shaking away those thoughts, I walked over to the fence surrounding the paddock and rested my elbows on it. Most people would wish they had some company during such moments because the sadness, loneliness and boredom were a constant plague on the nights I was not too exhausted. I didn't even own a phone so entertaining myself that way was out of the question. But I had made it a point not to be an ignorant fool and had taught myself whatever I could.

One of the farm boys, Dorian, was observant enough to notice my interest in books once. We weren't close because he didn't know how to communicate with me but he was aware of how I was treated by my superiors and other kids in town so maybe he felt sorry for me. He had started to bring me books from the local library and they became my comfort most evenings.

I lost myself in different worlds and also learned to do complex sums and write using advanced vocabulary from the educational materials he sometimes threw in. It had been a good run until Dorian's father had finally caught on to what was happening a few months ago and lectured him to stay away from me. I found out why later when I overheard some of the workers talking and realized Dorian was 'secretly' gay.

I didn't get it. Why keep things that were such a vital part of you a secret? Why so much discrimination? Homosexual, disabled, person of colour... Why couldn't we all just treat each other like human beings? Just because someone was different, it didn't make them unacceptable. Who set all these standards of what was acceptable, anyway?

In the middle of my musings, I noticed that a car had pulled up quietly at the end of the driveway with its headlights off. I frowned when I recognized whom it belonged to. Rhys Walton, Paige's perfect boyfriend who was apparently very skilled with his tongue. My fists clenched involuntarily at the thought and the images that followed.

I watched as Paige got out slowly from the passenger side and tried to control her giggles. Rhys came around to her and pressed her against the car as they kissed. I dug my teeth into my bottom lip, again unable to look away from them even if the sight pained me. I almost lost it when he kept trying to slide a hand up her skirt and she deterred him from it over and over again.

*Not your place, Oliver, I told myself. Stay out of it.*

She wasn't stupid. She had understood when I'd tried to warn her about being alone with Simon. If she really wanted to say 'no' to her boyfriend, I was pretty sure she would make that clear.

Finally, they stepped away from each other and he walked around to get back in the car, the engine humming so quietly because it was one of those sleek, expensive models that hardly made a sound. Paige waved goodbye to him and started to walk the rest of the forty yards towards the house. I wasn't

surprised to know that she had sneaked out with him. Eleven pm was her curfew because Scott was strict like that but she still found a way to see that dude.

When she was within a few feet of me and noticed me standing there, her footsteps halted. It made me ache inside to see her looking so pretty in her frilly, red skirt and a white sweater with her wavy blond hair falling around her shoulders and her lips painted a vibrant red.

Not only was she off limits but she didn't deserve me. I tried to tell myself that but as she moved closer to my side, I felt my pulse quicken. Her soft, flowery scent carried in the night air and enthralled me even further. I really was pathetic.

“Don't you *dare* mention this to my father, stable boy,” Paige warned me and then she waited a few seconds before letting out a careless giggle. “Wait, what am I saying? As if you can *mention* anything to anyone.” Another giggle and then she looked me up and down. “By the way, I thought you were illiterate all this time and just pretending to read books because you didn't want people to know you're stupid. Don't get me wrong, it's just that you didn't go to school since you came to live with us and I just thought maybe you've forgotten everything you must have learned as a kid. Your writing needs improvement though,” she added sagely and moved even closer.

I frowned down at her, confused by her eagerness to talk to me all of a sudden when she had gone quiet on me lately and a weird scent drifted up to my nostrils. Weed. I'd seen some of the boys on the farm smoke it and knew the smell. Paige was high.

Unbelievably, her hand came up to touch my arm and I stepped away quickly, feeling like she had burned me.

We stared at each other for several, tense seconds. Paige had never, ever touched me before. Never. No one had for years and the contact was...both disturbing and thrilling. What was going on with her?

“Great,” she drawled with a roll of her eyes. “What, you think you’re too good for me, stable boy?”

God, how I hated being called that.

“Oh my god, are you a virgin?” Paige asked me suddenly in a hushed voice.

I tensed at the intrusive question. Yeah. I was a virgin. But I didn’t see how that was any of her business.

“Awww. You look upset again,” she crooned at me, pouting her lips. “Where do you go when you look like that?”

*You’re the last person I would ever tell.*

With a sigh, a bored one because eventually she did get tired of teasing me sometimes, she turned around and walked away, heading inside her house a minute later. I stood in the spot for a long time, her question about my virginity reminding me of needs I thought I had buried long ago. I couldn’t go back inside the barn now. I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep.

So I decided to go to the only other place apart from my loft where nobody bothered me at this time of the night.

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Chapter Five

Paige

I watched him from my bedroom window once I reached upstairs, unable to help myself. He remained on the spot for a while before walking off hurriedly in a direction that wasn't the stable. A sense of dread overcame me suddenly as I watched his retreating figure in the night. It was almost midnight now and I wasn't sure where he was headed off to but it made me super uneasy.

Deciding that it was none of my concern, I spread out on the bed and blinked up at the ceiling, still feeling high from the joint I had smoked with Rhys. I hadn't wanted to but he made it look like fun and so I gave in to his urging. Not bothering to change out of my clothes, I turned on my side and looked towards the window again.

I thought about the boy and how my 'virgin' question had startled him, how he had reacted to my touch.

"God. Stop it, Paige," I scolded myself and twisted around so that my back was to the window. "Stop fucking thinking about him."

He hadn't been smelling bad just now. His scent had been so clean and soapy. It had felt good standing next to him in the night and feeling...safe and a little bit excited, I guess. But talking to him was so hard. I couldn't tell what he was

thinking or feeling and I couldn't imagine how frustrating it must be for him if it was this frustrating for me.

“*Aargh*,” I growled into my pillow and then tossed it aside before getting up and walking over to the window again.

My eyes searched whatever was visible of the grounds under the flood lights but I couldn't find him. Panicking a little and not wanting to dwell on that panic, I went downstairs quietly and slipped out the kitchen door, feeling my heart racing a mile-a-minute. I was just making an educated guess. The only thing that lay in the direction he had gone was the apple orchard and the river.

Oh, god. What if he had finally had enough of my taunting? What if he decided to-?

“No,” I whispered to myself in horror as I contemplated the possibility and then took off at a run.

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## Chapter Six

### Oliver

Lighting a small fire next to me on the grass beside the river, I sat there and watched the flames for a while. I hadn't even brought a flashlight when I'd made the impulsive choice to head out here but I did carry a box of matches on me at all times.

I wished I'd brought Ollie along though or at least a book for company. The sounds of the river could be heard in between the crackling of dry sticks and I felt kind of soothed by it, willing myself to relax, to not focus on anything but the peace and tranquility of the orchard around me. I had to do this. I had to keep myself in the moment because the past and the future were never pretty places to visit.

*It's going to be okay*, I told myself as I drew up my knees and placed my forearms on top, sucking in my bottom lip. *You're going to be okay. Just take it one day at a time.*

It wasn't working. Closing my eyes tightly, I tried to dredge up one memory, any memory that would make me forget the darkness and remind me that life could be beautiful.

Dorian's kindness, maybe. Or finding Ollie that day cowering in a corner of the stable, his fur matted after he'd gotten a little bit of rain on himself.

I started to relax again but it only lasted a few seconds before I heard someone's footsteps thudding through the grass and glanced up in surprise when Paige Hamilton appeared in front of me, her hair whipping around her face and her breaths fast and heavy.

I didn't even think before I got to my feet and rushed over to her, grabbing her by the shoulders and forcing her to look at me as I searched her face worriedly.

*Are you okay? What happened? Did someone do something to you?*

Damn it, I wished I could ask those questions out loud but I hoped the way I frowned at her and shook her slightly would convey my meaning.

Paige pushed me away almost at once and snapped, "Stop. What're you doing? I only came to see if you were still alive or not, you idiot."

I drew back at her response, definitely not having expected that. Suspicion brewed inside me. She ran all the way out here just to see if I was okay? Even though I'd heard her very clearly, I didn't believe her at all. She was probably up to something.

Without answering her, I went to sit back down and peered at the river, hating that she wouldn't let me be even now.

"You just looked really upset," she added. "I mean, you always do but...this just felt...different...like you were...you

know...”

I ignored her, wondering if she realized how ridiculous she sounded, claiming to worry about me after years of bullying me until I went to bed with tears in my eyes. I wondered if she remembered how she had gotten her friends to run away with my clothes a couple of years ago while I was out here bathing, knowing I wouldn't even be able to shout out a protest or call for someone to help me out. I'd had to wait until it got dark to walk back to the stables and by that time, I'd caught a fever.

The only reason I'd had to bathe here was because she'd been responsible for breaking my shower thinking it would be a good idea to hang out with some of her friends in the stables one Saturday despite knowing how much I hated being around people and noise. A brawl had occurred and they'd damaged so much stuff. All the horses had been okay but then, I'd had to spend the whole day repairing everything because she'd told her father I'd sneaked in alcohol, gotten drunk and tried to beat up some of the guys.

She definitely hadn't cared when Scott had hit me a few times before telling me to fix things the next morning. And her father hadn't even doubted her for a minute even after knowing me for years. He knew I never did stuff like that but it seemed as though any excuse would do to take me to task.

“Hey. Are you listening to me?” Paige questioned sharply.

*No. No, I'm not.* How did you sign ‘Go away’ again? I was going to have to teach myself that as soon as possible.

“Well, excuse me for not wanting someone to die on my property,” she muttered and I rolled my eyes.

Did she really think I'd let people like her break me to such an extent that I ended up taking my own life? I might be unable to switch off my feelings for her but it did not mean I was weak in every sense.

“Um...hey, can you walk me back to the house?” she asked after a minute. “I ran all the way out here and I wasn't even thinking about anything else but it's dark and I'm...scared.”

I raised my head to look at her, trying to figure out if she had any tricks up her sleeve. Maybe she'd called some of her friends to come and ambush me here in the orchard at night, strip away my clothes and tie me to a tree trunk. I swallowed at the thought. I wouldn't put it past them.

“Please,” Paige said and her tone sounded sincere enough to make me get to my feet and motion for her to walk on ahead.

I probably would have followed her back a certain distance, anyway. It really was dark out here. I knew my way around but the only way she'd been able to find me was by the light of the fire. My footsteps slowed as I observed her clumsy hiking, my forehead creasing in a frown again. She really had come all the way out here just to make sure I was okay.

Why?

When we reached the paddock area just before her house, Paige turned to me and studied me for a while. I looked back at her, not sure what she wanted from me.

“So...are you going to go back to the orchard?” she asked, sounding concerned again.

I gritted my teeth slightly. I didn't want her concern. A little too late for all that now. I just scowled and turned around to

leave.

“Wait. Listen.”

Her warm fingers wrapped around my wrist and I went still at her touch, staring at the ground beneath our feet like I’d never seen it before.

“Thank you,” she said softly. “For walking me back. And for not dying. Can I ask you something?”

All I could think of was the heat of her touch on my skin and it spiked up my heart rate. Even if I had the ability to speak, I wouldn’t have been able to respond to her in that moment.

“What is your name?”

That whispered question finally broke the spell and I slowly extracted my wrist from her hold before glowering at her, wishing I could hate her for a moment.

She wanted to know my name.

Now she felt like I should be called by one after all the labels she had bestowed on me so cruelly. She didn’t deserve to know it or say it. None of them did. Not anymore.

“Please tell me,” Paige said gently, acting so unlike herself tonight that I could only attribute it to the weed. Or maybe I was hallucinating.

Maybe all the pain had finally driven me insane.

Removing a matchstick from my pocket, I went on my hunches before her and wrote something on the patch of soil near the paddock as a reply before straightening and walking away, deciding to return to my loft and my cat, where nobody was fake.

It would satisfy her when she read it, knowing she had been able to drill my worth into me by her convictions and treatment. She would probably go to bed with a triumphant smile when she realized that was how I thought of myself as well.

*Stable boy or dumb kid, I had written. Just pick whichever one you like more.*







## Chapter Seven

### Paige

I couldn't stop thinking about him in school the next day. Time dragged by at a snail's pace and I just wanted classes to be over quickly so I could go home and see him. Last night, his sarcastic reply had both impressed and saddened me. I deserved it for everything I had put him through. But things were changing. I didn't want to be his enemy anymore. I wanted to stop.

He didn't have to forgive me at all. We could just...change the way we interacted with each other. I needed to stop acting like I was some superior species and let him know that I was sorry. That I was trying to make it up to him somehow. Not that I could. God, the things I had done...

I went shopping on my way home from school and spent some of my allowance on a new iPhone. I'd been saving the money to buy Rhys a present for Valentine's day but I felt like...the boy deserved it more. I felt really weird now, calling him that in my head. I mean, I hardly used to care before because he didn't matter before. Abruptly, I stopped at the door of the phone store as realization hit me.

He was starting to matter to me. Learning his name, learning everything about him was starting to matter. Being able to find

a way to communicate with him was starting to matter.

I didn't want to analyze it any further than that. I had a boyfriend and I wasn't interested in dating anybody else. Much less the stable boy. I mean, how would it look if I started going out with the town mute? My parents would go nuts and my friends would laugh at me. That was the last thing I wanted.

I was only trying to show him some kindness for a change, that was all. He could either take it or leave it but at least he couldn't say I didn't try.

...

He was mucking the stalls when I went to see him as soon as I got home and the stench made me cover my nose and feel like throwing up. I cleared my throat loudly and he looked up from his task, frowning when he saw me at the doors. Whoa. It was going to take a lot to melt this guy given all that pent up hostility he was directing my way.

“What's up?” I said casually and tried a smile. “Don't mind me. I just came to give you something.”

Taking the phone out from my bag, I put it on a wooden ledge beside me. “I thought you could use it. And I put my number in there in case you change your mind and decide to tell me your name after all.”

There was a heavy pause while he kept frowning at me and I sighed and started to leave. A loud clang made me flinch and turn back to look at him with a startled expression. My eyes

went to the shovel he had thrown against a wheelbarrow in order to get my attention. Stalking over to where I was standing, he picked up the phone, glared at it for a while and then stuffed it back inside my bag.

His whole attitude screamed, *I don't want anything from you.*

I swallowed and watched him silently as he went back to work before quietly placing the phone back on the ledge and walking away towards my house, hating the tight feeling in my gut.

...

He didn't text me that night or the night after that or even the one after that. Maybe he'd thrown my phone in the river. Maybe he'd shoved it in the manure where he thought it belonged.

Rhys came over one afternoon and tried to make out as usual but I couldn't even pretend to be interested anymore.

My every waking moment was spent thinking about the stable boy, who stubbornly refused to give me his name. I even started to have dreams about him at night, past visions of me being cruel to him and making him cry, shaming him for not being 'normal'.

How he must have hurt. Going to bed every night in a freaking barn with no one to comfort him. The guilt tormented me until I couldn't breathe easy and then four days later, I sneaked out to see him again, deciding to give it one more shot before I was forced to live with my monstrosity forever.

It was around seven pm and my parents had gone for dinner at the mayor's house. The mayor meaning Rayne's father. I had been invited too but I'd made some excuse about homework.

He wasn't in the stables when I entered it and I announced my presence before climbing the short ladder that led up to the loft. I paused when I reached it, looking around me with interest. I had never been up here before, not even when I had thrown those loud parties intended to disrupt his peace.

It was a small space but so well-kept. Just a bed against one wall and a small table next to it. A chest of drawers in a corner and some shelves. The rug on the floor was old but clean and the two windows were left open, allowing for some fresh air to drive out the smell of the stables below. So this was his space, his living condition.

While I remained all comfortable and cozy in satin sheets, he stayed here, cold and cramped. I sat down hard on the bed and winced when the thin mattress failed to protect my butt from hitting the wooden slats below it.

Misery overwhelmed me as I glanced around the dimly-lit place. My parents and I were guilty of such a huge crime. And so was every other person in this town who had known about his situation and never tried to help or say anything to my father.

I heard a tiny mewling sound from below the bed and blinked when a grey cat appeared from underneath, stretching and yawning. I'd seen it hanging around the farm every now and then but I had no idea it belonged to him.

“Hey, there,” I said softly and the cat took a while to lick its paws before glancing up at me and going still.

We stared at each other for several seconds and then I heard approaching footsteps and stood up quickly, relieved to see it was him, climbing up the ladder with a bowl of something in his hand.

He stopped abruptly when he realized who was in his loft.

“Hi. It’s me again,” I spoke up tentatively, worried he would get mad and decide to throw me down the ladder or something. “Sorry. I just came to...um...talk to you.”

He frowned in suspicion before walking over to the desk and placing the bowl of what I assumed was soup there. He must have gone to get his dinner from where the other workers’ stayed. I stayed quiet as he glanced at me once more, then walked over to the opposite wall and perched on the windowsill, looking outside. Ignoring me.

At least my dad let him have some nice soap and basic grooming items which I could see on the shelves. The fragrance of him, fresh and clean, was evident despite the place we were in and I took in the fact that even in old, worn-out jeans and a faded t-shirt, he looked so attractive, his hair falling in untidy waves over his forehead and ears. He needed a cut. And I needed to stop checking him out. I wasn’t here for that.

“Look, I’m really sorry, okay,” I burst out so suddenly, I startled the cat. It ducked back under the bed, probably not used to anyone else’s presence up here. “I know. I know I’ve been a complete monster. I wrote the book on how to be a mean girl, bullying 101. I also know an apology isn’t going to

fix things and you don't have to forgive me. You don't. But please let me be nice to you. I'm not playing any games, I swear. I just...I feel so bad, okay. I know how fucked up your life has been and I contributed hugely towards that. I really am sorry."

Taking a deep breath, I looked imploringly at his stubborn profile and said, "Just give me one chance to prove that I'm sorry. At least tell me your name."

He didn't even look at me and I let out a heavy sigh, realising how hopeless it all was. Why would he even want to give me a chance? I'd made his life hell. Why would he do this for me and let me have some peace when I had taken away every ounce of his?

When he straightened slowly and went over to the shelves to sift through some items, I felt like he was just waiting for me to leave so I decided to grant his wish. The only way he might believe I was being sincere was if I left him alone and never crossed paths with him again. If I stayed far away from him and let him be.

His boots on the hollow wooden floor sounded loud and I glanced up in surprise when he approached me and held up a book in front of my face. I looked at it in confusion. It was an old, *ancient* copy of Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. I didn't read much so I wasn't familiar with the story but I had heard of it, of course. What exactly did he want me to do here? Maybe he had decided to give me a chance, after all. Maybe was trying to make friends, find some common ground.

"Um...that's...that looks interesting," I managed to utter. "Can't say I've read it but...I'm sure it's a good story. You

have nice taste in literature.”

He regarded me blankly for a good five seconds before his lips quirked slightly in...wait, was he amused? He definitely looked amused. His brown eyes weren't so sad and his mouth looked like he was trying to hold back a smile. I bet it was because he knew I wasn't the least bit bookish.

He still held the book up though and with that same slightly amused expression, tapped his index finger where the title was.

“You want me to get you a book in return for that?” I asked in puzzlement. “Is that it?”

Still appearing amused, he turned away and placed the book on his desk beside the bowl of stew.

“What? I don't understand, okay. How am I supposed to know what you're trying to tell me? Why can't you use the phone I gave you? Or you could write it down for me. Or... wait, can you like mime it? Or mouth it or something?” I barraged him with questions and suggestions, mad that I had failed this first test but instead of paying attention to me, he began to spoon soup into his mouth.

He ate quickly and I realized it was because he was hungry so I fell quiet and let him have his dinner. Such a small bowl of soup for a grown boy after the long day he had had. That wasn't enough, I bet. I just hoped they gave him a good breakfast, at least.

With a sigh, I went over to look at the book again before picking it up and carelessly flipping through the pages, hoping it would give me some answers. I did it without care and then



stopped abruptly when he shot me a frown and took the book out of my hands to place it back on the desk. Yikes. I guess he didn't want people mishandling his precious books. It was already in really bad condition though. I was going to order a new copy for him tomorrow if I could find it online.

The cat came out again and started to wind around his ankles, not ceasing its mewling for even a second. It stood on its hind paws while placing the front ones on his owner's shins and its nose twitched before it started to make that feline noise again.

"I think it's hungry," I murmured and looked around the place. "Where do you keep the food? I can dish it out."

He didn't respond to me. Pushing back his chair, he bent to place half the bowl of soup in front of the cat and the creature leapt on it and began eating at once while I stared at it and then at him, feeling like something was clenching painfully around my heart.

The boy didn't look up at me. I wasn't even sure if I could have handled looking into his sad eyes in that moment, anyway. We didn't pay him. He couldn't buy food for the cat. I hadn't even realized. There were so many things... So many of these things that I took for granted which he went without.

To remain hungry so that the animal could eat. I had never in my life witnessed such kindness before. And it tore at my heart until I had to bite on my lip and get out of there, not even able to utter a single word anymore. No. There was no way an apology was going to fix this.

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## Chapter Eight

### Oliver

I came upstairs after my bath the next evening to find a large can of cat food on my desk. Unimpressed, I toweled my hair and wondered whether Ollie would even like the taste of it. Surprisingly, he gobbled up a dishful and sat there licking his paws, his tummy protruding slightly. I smiled upon seeing that and bent to scratch his ear before walking over to the window and putting the towel on the sill to air-dry it.

When I turned around, I noticed something new on my shelves. Several new things, actually. New books, toiletries, hair products and a shopping bag which looked like it contained clothes.

I didn't go near them. I didn't touch them or look at them again.

Grabbing my old copy of *The Time Machine*, I stretched out in bed and began to read. A beep and a vibration made me jump and I looked for the source of the sound. My desk drawer was open slightly and bright light peeked through from the gap. Letting out a breath, I turned back around and fixed my gaze on the pages again.

Ollie jumped on the bed and curled around my toes. His warmth and presence was welcoming and comforting. The

other strange, new things in my loft were not. I hadn't been shown much kindness all my life and now that Paige was trying to show it to me in spades, I decided I hated it.

I hated it because I had no idea how to respond.

Part of me started to feel like it was better when she had either walked all over me or seen right through me. I didn't know why she was so determined to shake things up now after I had been programmed to become the recipient of her bullying. I'd even gotten perversely addicted to it, maybe. It was like I didn't know how to be anything else with her than a victim.

And with that final thought in my head, I went off to sleep, ignoring my grumbling stomach. Ollie was fed and I didn't really feel like going to see all the other workers and enduring their moods tonight. I just wanted to be alone.





## Chapter Nine

### Paige

He replied to none of my texts and avoided me like crazy over the next few days. I sneaked up to his loft again and saw that he hadn't touched any of the things I had bought for him except for the cat food. It was frustrating but kind of cute, seeing how much stubbornness and self-respect actually lay underneath that silent demeanour of his.

But eventually, his ignorance started to make me mad. I had tried so hard to be his friend and he just acted like I wasn't good enough. I mean, he didn't even give me a chance.

The biggest blow came when Rayne dropped by one afternoon and grabbed my arm to drag me from the kitchen, out of earshot from my parents and looked at me with barely-contained excitement.

"Stable guy agreed to go on a date with me," she told me breathlessly and I blinked at her.

"Um...what?"

"Girl, I don't know what the hell happened but we met on the road yesterday and he helped me out with some car trouble. Next thing I knew I was giving him my number because he

just looked so damn cute and was such a sweetheart. Paige, I am dying here. He actually texted me last night.”

Rayne was wide-eyed and delighted while shock went through me at the things she was saying.

He had texted *her*? Using the phone *I* gave him?

“Paige.” Rayne shook me a little and stared at me expectantly. “What should I do? I didn’t even know he owned a phone. I just thought, what the hell, you know. Anyway, I can’t believe he said yes. Should I go ahead with this?”

My eyes narrowed at the idea of Rayne dating the stable boy and I stepped away from her and spoke in my most condescending tone.

“He doesn’t even have any money,” I informed her with a sneer. “So you can forget about him taking care of the bill. And he rarely showers. You want to be seen with a guy who carries the whole stench of the stable with him everywhere he goes? Come *on*, Rayne. You can do much better than that.”

Her lips thinned at my words. “Paige, I’m sure it’s not as bad as you’re making it out to be. I think I’m the first girl he has ever actually shown any interest in and frankly, I’m flattered given how guarded he is most of the time. I can go on one date with him at the very least to see how things turn out.”

I laughed at the hopeful and admiring tone of her voice, hatred slowly creeping inside my heart.

“Yeah, good luck with your one-sided convos. Hope you like hearing yourself talk. Because that’s all you’re going to be doing, honey.”



Rayne regarded me with an angry expression. “Why are you being such a bitch about this? I know you hate him but you and I both know the guy’s too good for every girl in this town. The fact that he considered me worthy of his attention is pretty amazing.”

“Okay, then. Fine. It sounds like you’ve already made up your mind, Rayne. Why did you even pretend to want my opinion?” I snapped coldly.

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “It’s what best friends do, Paige. We’re each other’s sounding boards. I can’t believe how bitter you still are about him, though. What has he ever done to you? Geez. Grow up.”

“You grow up,” I shot back at her childishly. “Drooling over the poor farm boy like literally all the other guys in Dreamhaven are dead. Rayne, I swear, if you start dating the town mute, all of us are going to think very hard about letting you hang around us.”

When I said those last words, she opened her mouth to regard me in shock and I immediately regretted them. I was only trying to dissuade her from saying yes to him. What was his deal? Why was he going after Rayne?

“I can’t believe I kept thinking you’ll grow out of this petty bullying crap one day, Paige,” she hissed at me. “I looked the other way because you’re like a sister to me and I love you. But you’re just hateful. You won’t even let him have one thing that could bring some joy into his life. I’m so sick of this. You and your issues with this guy can go eat shit.”

I pinned her with a narrowed-eyed glare but she turned and left my house with an air of determination around her which

told me that things were about to happen.

Things I wasn't going to like. Things that would get way out of my control if I didn't step in soon. I gave him an inch and he decided to bite the hand that fed him. Bastard.

He needed to be shown his place again. Nobody got to tell me how to treat him. He was mine. My toy to play with. My fucking possession.

...

I found him grooming one of the horses in the stable and grabbed his arm to lead him away into a corner, ignoring his startled look and glaring at him to make sure he knew exactly how pissed off I was.

“You are *not* going out with her,” I told him firmly. “I can't believe you had the audacity to think you'd be good enough to date someone like her. She's the mayor's daughter. What do you think he will do to you when he finds out Rayne is slumming it with you? Use your head. Why did you text her? And what made you think that you could use something I gave you to try and get a girl. That is so disgusting.”

He was breathing heavily as I ranted at him and I let go of his hand to climb the ladder upstairs to his loft.

“What the hell did you think? That I gave you all of this so you could impress my best friend behind my back? She tells me *everything*.” The bags and products I had given him lay untouched and I grabbed them one by one in anger. “Let's see how impressed she is when you show up on this stupid date

smelling like horse dung and wearing yesterday's clothes." I took the phone from on top of his desk as well and pocketed it.

"God, you're so smart, huh? You thought you could take advantage of my generosity and maybe get somewhere with the daughter of the mayor." I scoffed and went down to the stable again where he stood studying me with narrowed eyes. "You wouldn't even make it through one evening. Good luck, stable boy."

I walked out of there, refusing to feel even a little sorry for him this time. I now seriously regretted helping him out with anything (except for the cat food) and I hated how this whole thing made me feel deep down. How dare he?

~ ~ ~



## Chapter Ten

### Oliver

It started to rain that afternoon after I was done with my chores for the day and I decided to go for a swim in the river. The rain made me feel clean and new somehow. Like it was washing away all the bad stuff and I could have something good to look forward to. I took a long time getting rid of the dirt and stink from my body before returning to the barn.

After removing my muddy boots and using the shower stall to shed my wet clothes, I wrapped a towel around myself and made my way up the ladder.

For the second time that week, I found a girl waiting for me in the loft on my bed and I wondered why nobody seemed to realize the fact that this was an invasion of privacy even if I was practically living in a barn. It wasn't Paige this time, though. It was Rayne who kept looking at me like it was the first time she had ever seen me.

“Hi, there,” she spoke up and gave me a smile. “You weren't answering my texts. Did we somehow cancel the date without talking about it first?”

I went over to my desk and picked up the note I had written for her earlier, just in case. I hadn't believed she would bother to come and find me if she got no response but here she was

and I was kind of glad. Rayne had never actively taken part in any of the bullying and I didn't want her to think I had stood her up without an explanation.

She took the note from me uncertainly and said, "Err...I'll just take this down and read it. Let you get dressed."

With one last look at my body, she left.

In the note, I had explained everything about how much I liked the idea of hanging out with her like she had suggested when I fixed her car yesterday. I'd done that stuff loads of times before for the people who owned trucks on the farm so I was happy to help her out.

I also told her that I'd had my phone taken away like an errant child because according to my foster father's daughter, I had crossed the line and dared to hope for something more than this pathetic existence they had carved out for me.

In the end, I concluded the note by saying that I was really flattered by her interest but if I did start to date her, she might have to endure some of the bullying and taunting along with me and that was something I did not want.

It was all true. Dating hadn't been something I actively pursued due to some very solid reasons but Rayne was a nice girl and she had wanted to go out with me. I hadn't really planned to use her number but I kept thinking about Paige and feeling confused by her about-face so I decided to try at least one date with someone else. Someone I could actually trust and was not fixating on. I was almost eighteen and hadn't even kissed a girl yet so I figured I owed it to myself to give it a shot. I'd had no idea Paige would react so viciously.

It had hurt but then, I'd also felt a strange sense of relief after she had left, taking all her generosity with her. Some people just couldn't change and this thing with Rayne had proven that to me and taken away all my confusion once and for all.

I never wanted Paige Hamilton to show me anything but her contempt ever again. She could keep her kindness and respect. I didn't need it.

"Hey, is it safe to come up now?" Rayne called out to my surprise after I was done putting on a clean pair of jeans and an old t-shirt and dragging my fingers through my wet hair.

I thought she had left already after seeing how complicated this whole thing was.

Walking over to the edge of the loft, I motioned for her to come up and she grinned at me before doing so, looking really excited for some reason.

"Okay, one, Paige is a huge drama queen and she doesn't scare me and two, you have a gift with words, do you realize that?" she asked me, holding up the note. "I read an awful lot and this little paragraph right here told me a lot about your tone. It's precise, it's blunt and it's also kind of sarcastic. I love it."

Her response amused me and I pulled out a chair for her so she could sit down.

"If you don't mind...", she continued, tucking the note in her jeans' pocket, "...I would still very much like to have this date with you. We can go somewhere if you want or I can order pizza and bring over my laptop so we can watch a movie or something. I'm cool either way. You decide."

I looked at her curiously for a while as she sat there smiling at me. She didn't sound or act awkward at all and spoke to me as though I was completely capable of speaking back to her. It was so refreshing to have someone regard me this way.

“Oh, here.” She handed me her phone and I saw that the screen was opened up to a blank text window with the cursor blinking. “Let me see some more of that word magic you got.”

With a smile, I typed, **movie and pizza sounds good. I have no preferences with toppings and I really want to watch 'The Count of Monte Cristo' if you don't mind,** and handed the phone back to her.

I'd always known that the story had gotten movie adaptations but as a kid, I hadn't ever seen any of them.

Rayne grinned at the reply and shook her head, looking a little dazed. “A boy after my own heart,” she murmured and stood up. “I'm going to hop on home and get my laptop. Will order the pizza on my way there. I seriously cannot wait. See you.”

It was definitely weird. I couldn't really wrap my head around the fact that I was going to have a girl over for date night. Me. Oliver.

But she was so easygoing that I hardly felt any nervousness or doubt. Getting up, I fed Ollie and then shifted my desk to face the bed because there was no other comfortable place to sit and arranged the only two pillows I had against the wall.

Rayne was back in no time since her property was right next to the farm and set up her laptop on the desk, searching for and playing the movie I had wanted to watch since the day I had



first read that book. I think I was about nine at the time but it had impacted me so greatly.

It made me feel like even the ones dealt so unfairly by the hands of fate could still make a strong comeback and show the world who was boss. Not that I was interested in showing anyone anything but it was just...inspiring.

Rayne handed me a can of soda from her bag before settling down beside me to lean against the wall.

“Wow. This is really nice. I haven’t been on a date in ages. And by the way, the book is way better than the movie,” she informed me.

I smiled and felt myself getting caught up in the story unfolding before me, slightly awed by the fact that I was watching my first movie in years. I hardly even noticed when the pizza came and she went downstairs to get it. She placed the box between us and the aroma made my stomach growl loudly. When I gave her an embarrassed look, she just laughed.

“Dude, I totally get it. I mean, I actually skipped lunch and I’m starving,” she told me and took a huge bite out of her slice, munching and savoring the taste.

I did the same and it was heavenly. Something I rarely ever got a chance to taste. I must have eaten about six slices of that cheesy, meaty pizza and the movie got so interesting, I forgot someone else was there with me for a moment. They changed the ending and I couldn’t decide which one I liked better. Both had left me with a bittersweet feeling in my chest. A feeling I was familiar with.

“Did you like it?” Rayne finally spoke up as the ending credits rolled and I gulped down the rest of my soda.

I nodded slowly, still trying to analyze my reaction to the story. Seeing it on screen had been pretty interesting but reading the book had been epic.

“I’d love to know your thoughts right now,” she murmured next to me but I just frowned slightly and shook my head a little.

I didn’t know how to share my thoughts in that moment. They were hard for me to process sometimes. Reaching for the notepad and pen on the desk, I quickly scribbled something on it before handing it to her.

***Thank you for this. The pizza, the movie. You’re such a sweet girl, Rayne. I won’t forget this, I swear.***

Her lips curved in a smile as she glanced up from the note.

“You’re the rare gem here,” she told me softly and looked at my lips.

I went still and didn’t know how to back off without seeming completely rude. This might be my first date but I was aware of what you were supposed to do when the girl liked you and you had a nice time together. Yeah I was the outcast but men on the farm talked, often loudly and without filter so you caught on to stuff. I couldn’t bring myself to touch her though even though I had been open to the idea earlier. And I couldn’t explain where my sudden reluctance came from either.

Rayne studied my rigid expression for a moment and then moved away. “Too much, too soon?” she asked me wryly before getting up.

I tried to give her an apologetic look and she brushed it aside. “Hey, I get it. You’re not used to any of this. I won’t push you into anything. I mean, we can just hang out as friends if you like.” She sighed and cocked her head at me. “But I am interested in more, I want you to know that. And if you don’t mind, I would really like to know your name.”

We looked at each other for a while before I scooted forward on the bed, opened my desk drawer and took out *Oliver Twist*, showing it to her while putting my finger on the title. I could write it down for her but this was way more interesting.

She narrowed her eyes at it and then frowned at me quizzically.

“I’m just taking a wild guess here and assuming that you’re trying to tell me your name is actually...Oliver?”

I sucked in a breath when she said it, my grip on the book growing slack. The saddest feeling ever spread through me and at the same time, a feeling of relief. Of peace. I hadn’t expected her to get it so quickly so the fact that she did made me emotional. Rayne bit her lip before stepping forward and placing a chaste kiss on my cheek.

“I’m so sorry I never asked before,” she whispered in my ear. “It’s a beautiful name. Oliver.”

I could keep hearing it. In fact, I wanted to keep hearing it. It made me smile eventually and she smiled back at me.

“Tonight was a gift in more ways than one,” she told me before grabbing her bag. “Thank you. I have to head back now.”

I gestured to her laptop because she hadn't shut it down but she shrugged and said, "I don't need it until tomorrow. Watch another movie if you want. I have loads on that folder."

I wasn't sure about it and it showed on my face but she laughed and said, "Oliver, it's fine, really. Come on."

I was already growing fond of hearing her say my name and didn't argue. My heart was full of gratitude in that moment. I was dying to watch more movies and seriously couldn't thank this girl enough.

She waved goodbye to me before climbing down the ladder and walking out of the barn to her car. The bright screen of the laptop called out to me then. I didn't think I was going to be getting any sleep tonight. There was a whole world in that folder of movies waiting for me and my brain could only absorb so much in several hours.

I settled back against the pillows with my soda and for the first time in ages, I lost myself in something other than books.





## Chapter Eleven

### Paige

I went to see him early the next morning after his *date*. So many times during the evening, I had felt like disrupting their cozy meet-up by showing up unannounced but I did have my pride to think of.

For the first time since I had known him, he wasn't up with the sun.

In fact, the sight that greeted me made me blink in surprise as I entered his loft. Whoa. There was a pizza box lying on the floor with crumbs in it, a can of soda on the desk next to Rayne's pink laptop which I would recognize anywhere and a comedy show was playing on it in silent mode with subtitles on.

He lay on the bed on his stomach, his blanket half falling on the floor and his bare feet poking out.

If he had grown up in a normal home with a normal life, this is what it would have been like for him. Just another seventeen year old boy sleeping in after late night movies. Jealousy seized me as I took in the scene once more and slowly backed out of his space.

I'd felt rotten about overreacting yesterday and taking his things from him and I knew it had been petty. And the things I had said in such mean spirit had ruined all the good feelings I had tried to create between us. I hadn't slept very well last night and finally admitted to myself that I had real strong feelings for this boy who didn't want me.

Strong feelings like hate. I hated that he had been with Rayne. I hated wondering whether they had kissed or not. I hated the thought of this becoming a regular thing. God, I could *not* let that happen. I just hated the idea of him giving his attention to anyone else but me.

...

Rayne wouldn't stop talking about him in school all day. Yeah, we'd had an argument but in all these years, no argument had ever been strong enough to make us give each other the silent treatment.

We both attended Walton Prep school in the neighboring town of Cedarfield. Cedarfield was wealthier, bigger and all the rich kids went here while the other little folk made do with the public schools in both towns.

"I can't wait for my second date with him," my best friend gushed while twirling her pencil in class just before lunch time. "God, I still can't believe it happened, Paige. He was so sweet."

I gritted my teeth as I listened to her. She had given me a play by play of last night's date and I hated hearing every word of it. Desperately trying to divert her attention elsewhere, I quickly blurted out, "But what about Ethan? I thought you wanted him."

Rayne let out a wistful sigh when I mentioned the name of one of the hottest guys in Cedarfield, Rhys' older brother and the eldest grandson of Patrick Walton, the man who practically owned this town and everything and everyone in it. Ethan was actually away in college and he was one of those insanely good-looking, wealthy playboys (kind of like his brother) and ambitious as hell but he was also pretty unreliable as a boyfriend and a bit materialistic really. Rayne had spent years of her life crushing on the guy when he had been schooling here.

"I'm getting over him now," she told me with a shrug. "Besides, hanging out with Oliver taught me exactly what kind of guy I need to be with. Ethan is just going to have to survive without me."

I tapped my foot on the floor as our Math teacher, Mr. Ellis, explained some trigonometry concepts to us for the third time but I heard none of it, my mind stuck on replay on Rayne's account of the date.

I couldn't believe he had done all that with her, chilled and watched movies while sharing a pizza. Were they going to be boyfriend and girlfriend now? Was he really going to date my best friend after I had specifically told him not to?

"Paige. Hey." Rayne snapped her fingers in front of my face and frowned at me. "Do you think I could take him out



tonight?” she asked me. “Like to dinner or something. I think it’ll be good for him to get out a bit. I’ll ask your dad if they can let him finish his chores early.”

I dredged up a fake smile from the midst of the poisonous thoughts curling around like smoke tendrils inside my head.

“Let me ask him. Daddy wouldn’t say no to me.”

Rayne smiled back gratefully and nodded before going back to her books while I sat up in my chair with a calculating expression on my face.





## Chapter Twelve

### Oliver

The sun was beating down hard on me as I worked on the barbed-wire fences near the riverside. Despite wearing gloves, my hands were cut and blistered because I'd been at it for hours. Someone had torn down about thirty feet of fencing along the western side of the farm boundary and Simon had told me to get it fixed by the end of the day because I had shown up late to work.

I was sweating and hungry but when I wanted to return for lunch, he came by on his horse and yelled at me to work faster. One time. I had been late just this one time and this was my punishment. Now I regretted staying up late last night because it was seriously affecting my ability to function as usual.

My stomach growled yet again and weakness took over me after five more minutes so I threw all my tools down, mounted my stallion and headed back to the workers' quarters. It wasn't crowded because lunch time was over an hour ago so I got to sit and eat in peace all by myself. Until Simon spotted me again and came over to breathe down my neck.

"I thought I told you not to show your face back here until you were *done* with the fences," he growled at me and I let out an irritated breath before getting up to leave.

Simon put a hand on my shoulder to stop me, even though he *knew* his touch was not welcome. I wanted nothing more than to have the luxury of hitting him without consequences but I'd learned the hard way that that wasn't possible.

"I'm sensing some attitude in you," he said dryly, peering into my eyes and pressing his fingers down hard on my shoulder. Enough to hurt me. "It better not be there when you show up to work tomorrow morning, boy, or else I'm going to start thinking maybe we're being too easy on you."

He gave me a slight shove to get me moving again before striding off while I stood there and watched him go. Easy on me? Was he serious?

Feeling angered and riled up, I cleaned up my dishes before finding my horse again to return to my chores, determined to finish those fences by sundown. Sometimes exertion was the only thing that helped.

...

Just after sunset, when I trudged up to the barn to take a small nap because my eyes were killing me and so were my hands and feet, I received a slight shock upon seeing Paige's father, Scott Hamilton, standing at the entrance to the stable.

I paused, regarding him warily and wondering what he wanted. He hardly paid me any attention. Years ago, he had handed me over to Simon and never even cared what happened to me unless it had to do with a complaint where my attitude needed adjusting according to his second in command.

A part of me felt at times that this man had simply pimped me out to his most loyal dog and known he would keep me in line by any means necessary. He was supposed to be my foster father. My guardian. He possessed none of those qualities.

“Come here, boy,” my joke of a foster parent called to me when he noticed me standing outside.

Reluctantly, I made my way over and when I reached him, he clamped a hand on the back of my neck and forced me to enter the shadows of the barn with him.

“Do you remember why I brought you here years ago?” he asked me, his voice low and threatening and I swallowed at the hint of malice I detected in his eyes.

“Nod at me if you can’t speak!” he spat out making me flinch a little and I did as he asked.

His lips flattened and his eyes were like chips of ice. “I don’t think you do,” he said softly. “Because if you did, I wouldn’t have to come here and remind you.”

His hand, which was still on my neck, pressed hard and I tried to move away but he shot me a deadly look of warning.

“So you had a girl over last night?” he sneered at me. “Think you’re all grown up now, huh? This isn’t why I took you out of that shithole and gave you a place to stay. Gave you freedom to live on your own. Who do you think you are to bring girls here when my back is turned? Did you ask my permission? Did you really think it was okay?”

Pain shot up the back of my neck as he squeezed harder with each statement, his voice angry yet controlled.

Freedom? These people were all deluded. If I wasn't such a slave to my feelings and so hung up on Paige, I would go back to that *shithole* rather than stay here with them.

“From now on, you don't get such privileges,” Scott stated grimly. “All your things have been moved to the main house. In the basement. You only get out when the sun rises and get back in before nightfall. You will go nowhere else, see no one else. I will personally make your life a living hell if you do. Am I clear?”

The tears that threatened to fall made me feel ashamed of myself. Ashamed because I wasn't strong enough to protest or fight back. I couldn't even tell him what I thought of his methods and ideas. I had no fight in me.

“Follow me, boy.” Finally, he let go of my neck and I rubbed it with a grimace. My gaze went up to my loft and searched because I couldn't just leave without Ollie but Scott's words brought my attention back to him.

“You won't find that little pest up there,” he informed me with narrowed eyes. “Just another mouth to feed and that's the last thing I need in my house.”

My heart started thudding harder as he spoke and I knew...I knew I couldn't bear to hear what he had to say next. But even when I pressed my hands to my ears to shut out his voice, it penetrated through, muffled yet as unfeeling as ever.

“I had it drowned. You should have thought of asking me before you decided you could keep pets. I own you, boy. And from this day on, you will not take my kindness for granted.”

~ ~ ~





## Chapter Thirteen

### Paige

“This is all my fault. I should *never* have tried to date him. Now he’s in trouble because of me.”

Rayne was going frantic with worry in my living room later that evening when she came over to ask about the stable boy and I lied and said that despite me trying to convince my dad to allow him to date, I had been unsuccessful. I listened to her only absently while studying my fingernails, inwardly very pleased with this new turn of events.

When I told my father about his foster son dating the mayor’s daughter and my own best friend, he was livid and I thought he would just punish him by giving him a stern lecture and sending him off to do more chores.

But this was awesome. He was now living under my roof and was officially grounded. This was a hundred times better. I could play with him as much as I wanted now without my parents getting suspicious as to why I was spending time with him. They just handed him to me like an early Christmas present.

“I’m gonna go talk to him,” my friend announced and I stood up at once to stop her.

“Dad says he isn’t allowed any visitors,” I blurted out.

She inclined her head at me and gave me a droll look. “Paige,” she said in a patient manner. “We’re the only ones here right now. Who’s gonna tell him?”

God, she was getting on my nerves now. I cared about her an awful lot but not when she kept making attempts to get close to *him*. Didn’t she get it? I’d give her the clothes off my own back if she needed them as long as she stayed away from him. I wasn’t done with him yet. He thought he was way too good for me and only teaching him a lesson was going to set my mind at ease now.

I followed Rayne to the basement with a grimace because I was not too pleased with the way things were rolling at the moment. I took my time reaching the door which Rayne had left unlocked and peered down the stairs. The basement was well-lit and spacious. Rayne’s hushed voice floated up to me but I couldn’t see them unless I went down which I didn’t want to do.

I wondered what she was saying to him and more importantly, I wondered why he wasn’t chasing her away with his melodramatic attitude like he had done to me that day when I had tried to give him a phone. I hated the fact that he had decided to hold on to the grudge he had against me.

I had *tried*. I had tried to be good to him but he had shown me his arrogance and stubbornness. He’d proved that he had no intention of forgiving me and I resented that so much; the way his rejection made me feel.

How dare he? Who the hell did he think he was to treat me like I wasn’t good enough? He was so beneath me on every

level. A dog my father had plucked from the streets to give a home to. I shouldn't have let my guard down. I shouldn't have tried to extend that olive branch. If I had gone on hating him like always, at least this sting of rejection and jealousy would not be driving me insane.

There was silence for a long minute which made me frown curiously but then my friend was back, coming up the stairs with a skip in her steps. She blushed and grinned as she looked at me before brushing past and I felt bitter thinking of what he must have done to make her look like that.

“What happened?” I asked Rayne casually as I followed her back to the living room.

She giggled and plopped down on the sofa with a dreamy sigh. “Nothing,” she murmured, still grinning like an idiot. “I mean, I just can't get over how hot he is, you know. Ethan was hot and stuff as well but Oliver could give any guy around here some serious competition. He actually let me hold his hand this time. That's progress.”

*Oliver.*

My head started pounding when I realized just how much he had shared with her. She had not mentioned his name when she'd been talking about him at school so I wasn't sure when he told her that. Also, when I had touched him that night, he had acted like I had a disease or something. I felt my blood heating up and bit my lip hard at the reaction.

*Oliver.*

He was making me feel out of control. He was deliberately doing this because he must know Rayne would talk to me

about it and reveal every single detail. Sure, he had been closed off from society a lot but all guys knew that, right? He was trying to fuck with my head by using my best friend and she wasn't even aware.

My guilt had been misplaced. I knew that now. As soon as I'd tried to be nice to him, he had decided to get back at me by asking my best friend out, knowing how it would affect me. He'd actually turned out to be sneakier than I had believed he could be.

But he was deluded if he thought I was going to let him get away with it.





## Chapter Fourteen

### Oliver

It was so quiet down here. This time, the silence which I normally preferred was more suffocating than peaceful. No horses harrumphing down below, no wind blowing in through my open windows, no sound of the flowing river.

No *Ollie*.

I squeezed my eyes tightly at the sharp reminder that made my chest feel like it was about to burst from agony.

*I had it drowned.*

Swallowing past the tightness in my throat, I buried my hands in my hair, huddling against the wall in a corner of the basement because the light was so bright in this room and I didn't like it. But there were no other lamps or candles and if I turned it off, I would have to stay in total darkness. I didn't know which was worse. That, the silence or my loneliness which affected me much more strongly now that I didn't even have animals for company.

I wanted morning to come fast so I could be out there, tending to the horses and breathing in fresh air like I was used to. This was the worst kind of punishment for someone like

me. Maybe Scott knew that. I would take being bullied over being imprisoned any day.

Rayne had been so nice to me, so understanding. She kept apologizing and I didn't know why. I hardly listened to her because my head was too full of grief. It wasn't the thought of losing Ollie that haunted me so much. It was how he must have suffered when...

Something heavy and huge grew in my chest and tried to push its way up. Some feeling. An urge. But when it reached my throat, I shoved it back down again. It was such an alien feeling and it scared me because I didn't understand what it was. What it wanted me to do.

I tried to focus on how Rayne's hand had felt over mine when she had reached for it. For the first time since I'd entered my teens, someone's touch had not bothered me. It had felt good. So good that I had gripped her hand right back, needing something to hold on to. My only true friend was drowned. Drowned because of me.

But for a moment, having someone's hand in mine had been the sweetest feeling in the world. She'd left quickly after that because she said she didn't want me to get in trouble or anything in case Paige's father came back. I'd wished so much for her to stay though. Just for a little while longer. I didn't want to be alone with my grief.

Footsteps sounded on the basement stairs and I glanced up to find Paige making her way over to me. The last thing I needed was to hear her taunts and jabs while I was already at my lowest point tonight. When was she going to give me a fucking break?

She was probably responsible for the situation I was in right now. Who else would have told Scott Hamilton about the date? Paige was the only other person Rayne must have confided in.

Much to my surprise, she actually lowered herself next to me on the floor which was carpeted but still hard and cold.

“You hungry?” she asked me in a shockingly sweet voice and I turned my head to frown at her.

She appeared genuinely concerned but then she was mercurial and I knew she could change her colours like a chameleon.

“I’m making burgers tonight so if you want to come upstairs and eat with me, I’d really love it,” she said and even smiled a little this time.

My god, this girl was the very definition of fickle. It was like she couldn’t even decide whether she wanted to hate me or like me.

“Come on. Dad isn’t home. You can’t keep moping like this.”

Her hand touched mine all of a sudden and I immediately pulled it away. I felt her stiffen next to me and after a moment, she let out a heavy sigh.

“Oliver, I’m *trying* here,” she said to me, surprising me with the use of my name.

It felt strange hearing it from her silken tongue. Like a snake whispering things to entice me in the Garden of Eden. She must really think I’m stupid. I may not have gone to school for years but I’d observed people all my life and was not at all oblivious to the fact that she was clearly up to no good.



When I remained silent for another long minute, just glowering at my feet, the sound of her sniffing drew my attention back to her face. God, she was *crying*. My heart twinged inside my chest at the sight and sound of that. Paige. No.

“I know I don’t deserve your forgiveness,” she said to me for the second time that week. “I know, okay. I’m not asking for it. But I really do want to be good to you. It’s...it’s just going to take me some time, Oliver. I wasn’t cut out for kindness. I wasn’t raised like that but at least let me try and make amends.”

It tugged at my heartstrings. She really sounded upset and I didn’t like it. I didn’t like being the reason she felt hurt in any way which made me weak, I knew that. But still, nothing could have prevented me from reaching out a hand and pushing back the swathe of blond hair falling over her cheek as she cried into her hands. I needed to see her face, have her look into my eyes so I could let her know how sorry I was.

Paige lifted her head and searched my expression for a minute before gently placing her own hand over mine.

She was so close, her scent wrapped around me, inviting and thrilling but kind of unsettling because it still scared me, the idea of growing close to her in any way. I almost laughed at myself. As if I could ever have walked away. I had plenty of chances. I wasn’t a kid. But maybe, just maybe...I had convinced myself to stay for this very reason, this very moment right here.

She sniffled once more, her lashes shining with tears and inched closer to me. I held my breath for a moment as she

looked at my lips before slowly bringing her face really close to mine. I didn't want to move away. For the first time ever, I craved the feel of someone's lips against mine. Her lips.

But just before she could kiss me, which was what I assumed she wanted to do, I turned my face away and her mouth barely grazed my jaw. She'd kicked me when I was down way too many times for me to welcome her into my space like nothing had ever happened.

But when my stomach grumbled, I realized I could take her up on one of her offers for now. I was distrustful, not stupid. I knew I needed to eat after the day I had had. Biting a corner of my lip, I glanced at her once more to gauge her reaction and was a little stunned to find her smiling at me again.

“Burgers?” she prompted in a cheerful voice and I felt the tightening in my chest ease up a bit.

Enough to clear away the haze of pain and misery that had clung to me all evening. I gave her a small, hesitant nod and Paige grinned at me before getting to her feet.

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## Chapter Fifteen

### Paige

“You want to help me make them?”

I looked over at *Oliver* as he sat at my kitchen table five minutes later while I took out ingredients for burgers from the fridge and cupboards.

God, this fake sweetness thing was really exhausting, especially with someone as dumb as him. There was only so much you could do with a one-sided conversation. It would have helped if he had known sign language or something but nope. Nothing. If he wanted to tell me something, he usually communicated with his eyes. But I didn't like looking into his eyes all the time. His stare was too intense for my liking. The connection made me uncomfortable.

He acted like he didn't hear my question as he went over to the kitchen window and looked out into the night. Looked at the stable, his former home. I guess he must be missing it. I could probably convince my father to dump him back there. Once I was done with him.

When he'd pulled his hand away from me down in the basement *and* turned his face away too, it had pissed me off so bad. This little *nobody* had the nerve to reject me so many times, over and over, every time I tried to get close.

I'd watched him and other men on the farm tame spooked horses before. I had observed the patience and skill that was required to calm them and gain their trust. He was behaving like one of those spooked animals right now and I knew I had to be careful if I was going to play the ultimate game with him. I needed to practice that same skill and patience.

Slapping some lightly fried patties on burger buns, I sprinkled a bit of lettuce and dribbled some mayonnaise on it before serving him a plate.

"Dig in," I said. "I'm not great at cooking. I mean, Mum usually does it so..."

I trailed off when he came back down to sit at the table and bit into the burger with his head lowered. I could have easily given him poison and he wouldn't have thought to check. Idiot.

Even though I wasn't too hungry, I made myself take a bite. The kitchen was silent and warm and I took in the strangeness of the situation. My father would freak out if he knew about this but only because Oliver had dared to accept my dinner invitation. Mum would grow suspicious because I was alone with him in the same room and not openly taunting him. I guess they had left me behind with him in the house because they knew I hated him first of all. And the other reason was probably that he was technically my foster brother. Right? So the last thing my parents would expect would be for anything weird to happen between us.

Oliver had a record for keeping to himself most of the time. No trouble. Nothing offensive or out of line. He was the proverbial good dog and could be trusted with anything. Not

that we made him aware of the fact. I mean, it might go to his head.

I paused mid-bite when he suddenly stopped munching on the burger, placed half of it on the plate and then turned in his chair. But then he went still, staring down at the floor with the plate in his hands. Like he had been expecting something and had just realized it wasn't there.

My eyes moved to the window and then back to his tense profile. I knew what he was searching for.

“I can go feed him if you want,” I offered weakly. “If you go out, you'll just get in more trouble.”

He said nothing to me as he dropped the plate back on the table but I saw him biting hard into his bottom lip. Honestly, he could be so weird sometimes. For a brief moment, he closed his eyes and then got up from the table, rubbing a hand over his face. Then, without even thanking me, he just walked out of the kitchen.

I rolled my eyes when he was gone. Yeah, I knew he couldn't actually *thank* me but a nod of acknowledgment might be good. A smile, maybe. Okay, a grunt. Anything but-

I jumped slightly in my chair when he suddenly reappeared in the kitchen, his expression grim and his height looming over me even as he stood opposite me at the table.

I eyed him warily but all he did was point to the candles sitting in the middle of the table. With a frown, I looked from the candles to him and shook my head to indicate I didn't understand.

He leaned forward to grab one of them and held it up to me, I guess to show me that he wanted it and when I nodded slightly, he disappeared again, his heavy booted footsteps loud in the corridor until they faded away.

Yeah, like I said. Weird. Weird was the only way I chose to describe him. Because endearing or adorable was going to sound like blasphemy to the part of me that had made up its mind to hate him.







## Chapter Sixteen

*A loud crash followed by screams reverberating through the house made the boy jump in his chair, causing the bowl of cereal he was eating to topple over. They couldn't be fighting again. Not again. Not when he had kept quiet as the man had demanded and stayed out of his way.*

*He could never ignore his mother's screams though so he got up and ran towards the back of their house, inside the dark bedroom and called out in a timid voice.*

*"Mama."*

*She was cowering next to the bed and the big man was looming over her.*

*"He's in my face again. Laura," the man growled in his heavy voice. "I told you I don't want to be reminded of the boy when I am inside this house. I fucking told you!"*

*"No, please," the woman whimpered and despite knowing how dire the consequences will be, the boy dared to venture further in the room. He couldn't just leave his mother like that.*

*"Mama," he said again, just four years old and he had seen uglier days so he wasn't panicked. Just weary of the conflicts.*

*"You." The man rounded on him. Hard to believe this was the same man responsible for creating the boy, looking at the amount of hatred he harbored for someone who had never done him any harm.*

*His hand was wrapped around the boy's throat within seconds and he lifted the child up off the ground to glower at him. "I thought I told you to stay the fuck out of my sight," he spat and shook the boy who made choking sounds and wriggled his legs.*

*"No." The woman lurched at the man in protest but was kicked away and she groaned at the impact, curling up on her side on the floor.*

*Tears streamed down the boy's cheeks while the man sneered at him.*

*"Not a sound. Not a peep," he grated and tossed him aside like he was nothing but a rag doll. "And not a fucking whimper!" he yelled again when the child clutched his throat and wheezed. "You shut the hell up, boy or she gets it."*

*He tapped his booted feet near the woman's stomach threateningly and the child gasped once before clamping his lips shut tightly, placing his hands over his mouth and forcing himself not to make a sound.*

*The man narrowed his eyes at him and pointed to the open doorway. "Get out."*

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Chapter Seventeen

Oliver

My palms were on fire again. Another long day of fixing the fences. Despite my stubbornness, I hadn't managed to get it all done yesterday. Simon coming to breathe down my neck again and yelling my head off twice had been the highlight of my failure. Paige had actually given me food this morning to take with me and I hadn't wanted to accept it but I also hadn't wanted to return to the workers' quarters for lunch until I was done with the fences.

It was dusk now and getting chilly. I searched in my bag for my hoodie and put it on before walking over to the edge of the property and gazing out at the river with my hands in my pockets. The colours of the receding sunset were so serene today. A pale pink hue settling over the river and across the horizon.

In the distance, I could see the outline of Cedarfield, our neighboring town, my *home* town, and wondered if I would ever get a chance to visit. I'd heard so much about it over the years from other people. It was said to be quite wealthy and thriving now due to the Walton family businesses.

I heard the sound of a galloping horse and turned to see Paige Hamilton making her way towards me, appearing so

regal and beautiful, I immediately clenched my jaw at the way my heart began to skip a few beats. Yeah, so she was trying. But how long was that really going to last before she went back to being a mean girl again?

She hopped down from the horse and gave me a friendly look while removing the backpack attached to the saddle.

“I come in peace,” she said with a grin that could melt even the coldest of hearts and mine wasn’t fully frozen over yet despite my hellish life so what was I to do but smile back? Just a little.

I didn’t want to hurt her feelings again like last night but I also didn’t want her to think I trusted her.

“How was your day, Oliver?”

I puffed out a breath. My day had been just like all the other days on the farm. Tiring and uncomfortable. I wished so many times I could go to school like other teenagers. I wished I had friends. I wished I could be able to speak, even if it was to curse my life. Or the heavens.

I looked back at the river and breathed in the cold air, dreading the inevitable darkness because I had to be back in that basement soon. Not in my stable. Last night, I hadn’t been able to sleep well at all because of the strange surroundings and weird closed off atmosphere.

“Hey.” Paige’s hand came to rest on my sleeve and I just gave her a blank look.

Why, why are you doing this? What do you want from me? I don’t know how to respond. I don’t know what to do or when

you will decide I'm not good enough again. Not eloquent enough or sophisticated enough.

I wished Rayne would come to see me instead. She was safer.

“Do you want some dumplings?” Paige asked me. “Mum made some for dinner and I just didn’t want you to eat in the basement. I’m not sure if they’ll go out again tonight. Come on. I also got some snacks. Figured you might be hungry.”

She was right about that. I was *always* hungry. So I followed her to the spot she indicated, both of our horses grazing just a few feet away. After uncapping a bottle of water and washing my hands, I aimed a questioning look at Paige.

She aimed one right back at me and slowly, I let the water trickle between my fingers until it sprinkled on the grass before making a question mark sign in the air.

For a while, she sat there and frowned at me, trying to understand what I was asking and for some reason, it started to amuse me. The way her facial muscles worked as she thought deep and hard and indulged my guessing games and strange manner of communication.

I had never tried to learn sign language. I’d always preferred to write down whatever I felt and kept mostly to myself, refusing to cooperate when my teachers insisted it was the only way for others to be able to understand me. I hadn’t *wanted* anyone to understand me or bring attention to myself and I could never divulge the reasons why. In my foster home, they had given up trying to make me learn as well as long as I wrote down what I wanted to say.

“Are you asking me about Rayne?” Paige finally spoke up in a voice that didn’t sound happy at all. “Is that it? You want to know where she is?”

I nodded and Paige narrowed her eyes at me, “Should I call her for you? Maybe you’d prefer to eat with her instead. It’s not a problem. She can come *right* over.”

After removing her phone from her pocket, she began to type something in it, her face red and tight with suppressed anger.

I strolled over and put my hand over hers, stopping her before she could text her friend. When Paige met my eyes again, I shook my head at her to indicate that that was not what I wanted.

It was unbelievable that she could be this jealous over me and Rayne. Why in the world would she care?

She let out a sigh before putting her phone away and I made as if to stand but her fingers wrapped around my wrists and she turned my palms up to stare at them. They were covered with blisters and I tried to retract them but she wouldn’t let go.

“I felt these yesterday but I didn’t know they were this bad,” she said in a choked voice.

They have been this bad for years, Paige. Why are you only just noticing? I wanted to ask.

But as she studied my blisters morosely, I bit a corner of my lip and felt kind of ashamed of my bitter thoughts. She was sorry and she was trying to be better. I could let her. I didn’t have to be her.

“When we get back, I will treat them for you,” she told me and looked up at me with tears in her eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m

sorry they work you so hard.”

I swallowed thickly and this time, when I pulled away, she let me go.

I sat down beside her with my knees drawn up and forearms resting on them, feeling extremely overwhelmed by my emotions. I'd always cared about Paige. Always wanted her. And now it seemed like she wanted me back. It was so hard. Not liking her. Forcing myself to fight those feelings. To not give in. To wave away her attention.

All I wanted...all my love-starved soul wanted, was to give her everything I had in me, broken as it might be. Hoping she would take my scars and replace them with warmth and affection. God, I hadn't experienced that ever since I entered the foster care system. Not even for a day. And it was a painful existence. Especially after losing Ollie and being forced to live in the basement like a prisoner.

At that moment, she could have been the devil breathing false promises in my ear and I would have gladly eaten out of her hand just to have those few moments of acceptance. To have someone look at me like I mattered.

I felt her fingers in my hair then and blinked away my tears before closing my eyes. This wasn't just her being friendly. I was pretty sure friends didn't keep touching you like this.

“I'm going to have to shampoo this,” she told me as she played with my strands and leaned in a little. “Your hair is beautiful. It deserves to be pampered.”

There was a pause as the chilly, riverside air swept over us and darkness slowly descended. I'd been alone with a girl just

a couple of nights ago in my loft for the first time and hadn't felt like this. This kind of tension in my body.

“And so do you,” Paige added with a whisper, causing something inside me to stir.

Did she really feel that way about me now? I thought back to last night and how she had almost kissed me and for a moment, I regretted that I hadn't let her.

“How about it?”

I glanced at her in puzzlement and found her face close to mine again, her scent alluring and tempting.

“Will you let me shampoo your hair tonight? After my parents go to bed? In my bathroom?”

The way she phrased her questions and her breathless tone caused me to shift away from her yet again because it was making me a little stiff. Her fingers retreated from my hair and immediately, I felt bereft. I wanted her touch back.

After a few seconds, I gave her a nod and my lips formed the word, ‘Yes’.

She appeared surprised at that before smiling at me happily.

“Awesome. Now eat up. We don't want to be late getting back.”

...

What was I even doing sneaking into her room at night? I almost hadn't shown up but Paige had come down to the basement around 9 and whispered for me to follow her.

And like an idiot I did.

The hallway was dark, her parents were asleep. The disturbing thought that I was now living under their roof and was technically their foster child no matter the circumstance occurred to me.

And now I was inside their daughter's bedroom. Paige Hamilton, Dreamhaven's pampered princess who suddenly wanted to pamper me.

There were red flags all over this scenario.

Scott could wake up and beat the shit out of me. His wife would scream fucking murder. Paige could still be playing with me and maybe get me in trouble with her parents and then laugh about it later. Hurt me all over again like she loved doing.

"Close the door, Oliver," she whispered frantically and I gave a start and banged it shut in alarm.

We both winced before growing very still while listening to any sounds coming from down the hall. After a minute, when we realized her parents were still asleep, we simultaneously breathed a sigh of relief.

Paige laughed a little before gesturing for me to come further inside her room. It was warm in here and so cozy. Everything was done in pale purple and white and she only had the bedside lamp on which cast a soft glow over the room but threw some spots in shadows.

“It’s getting chilly now, isn’t it?” she said quietly as she walked around the place, tidying it up.

I remained pressed to the door while I watched her uncertainly.

“I hope you have some warm clothes to wear and extra blankets,” she continued, drawing the lacy curtains. “If not, just ask me. I’ll be happy to lend you some.”

She turned around, caught me staring at her and gave me a sweet smile.

“Come on, let’s go do what I promised I will do for you,” she invited and walked inside her bathroom.

Was she really going to wash my hair? And I was going to let her? This was stupid. I didn’t even know-

“Oliver, come on. We don’t have all night.”

I took a deep breath and made myself move. I had to admit that being here with her in her room even it was for something as ridiculous as getting my hair shampooed was a hundred times better than being in that basement.

God, I missed my loft so much. Maybe this version of Paige could help me return to it by talking to her father and helping to change his mind. I couldn’t stay down there. I had to leave.

She was standing outside the shower stall in her shorts and a tank top and holding a shampoo bottle in her hands, regarding me expectantly.

I came to a standstill and my gaze went from her to the shower and back, my heart beating erratically. I shook my

head at her slightly when I realized what she needed me to do in order to accomplish her ‘task’ for the evening.

Paige just smirked at me, looking really cute and sexy.

I paused and inhaled deeply once more. I didn’t think I had ever called a girl sexy in my life. I hardly ever entertained such thoughts and usually worked to the point of exhaustion, leaving myself no room to long for what I could not have.

But I could have this now. So that made it harder to ignore. For the first time in my life, I experienced excitement unlike anything else although a part of me was still a little terrified.

“You can just wear your boxers,” she told me in a casual tone. “I’ll give you a towel. Come, Oliver. It’ll be fun. Don’t think too much.”

Things were escalating quickly.

Fun.

When had I ever had that?

I was going to go back to the stables anyway and she was going to go back to treating me like shit so this might be all I would ever get. The memory of me standing under her shower and feeling her hands in my hair.

While I wore nothing but boxers and she was in her sleep attire.

Outrageous.

Please don’t play around with me, I thought desperately as I stripped myself off my jeans, hoodie and t-shirt without looking at her. I wasn’t exactly shy about it. I’d practically grown up around animals and of course, didn’t have a hundred

percent privacy living in the barn. Also, I still bathed in the river a lot (making sure to leave my clothes in a place where she will not run away with them). Another thing I missed doing at nights although I wouldn't try it now when it was too cold.

Paige stared at me as I walked over to her and stepped inside the shower stall. She looked completely serious as she adjusted the knobs on the valve and then opened the tap.

Warm water sprinkled out of the showerhead and I closed my eyes and gasped, letting it cascade over my tired body. Then I raised my hands and got my hair wet properly so that it would be easier for her to shampoo, wincing when it stung my blisters.

Hell, what was I doing? Why her?

I mean I knew why but...

I stopped thinking too much like she had asked when her fingers delved into my hair, the same way they had earlier this evening by the riverside. She stood at the edge of the stall and quietly lathered it with a strawberry-scented shampoo. My scalp tingled wherever she touched and the places she didn't touch on the rest of my body tingled as well.

It was a good thing I was facing the wall with my back to her because I was slowly starting to get an erection just from the anticipation coursing through me. I knew she didn't just invite me to her room at night to wash my hair. Or was I simply reading too much into it?

After she was done lathering and rinsing, Paige turned off the water, handed me a towel and said, "I'll be in the room."

Then she left me to dry up with an aching erection to torture me which I quickly brought under control. It was okay. I was used to it anyway.

Now thank her, say goodnight and leave, Oliver, my inner voice told me. You can't trust her. She takes things away almost as flippantly as she gives them.

Blowing out a breath, I wrung out my wet boxers and wrapped them up in the towel before pulling on my jeans.

When I entered the room, she was sitting on the bed with a first aid box and patted the space next to her. Against my better judgment, I made my way over and sat down, allowing her to take my hands into hers gently before she used some soap and water from a bowl to clean them, making me wince yet again. The blisters had already popped and it stung like hell but I held still and watched her apply ointment over them and then loosely wrap my hands up with a bandage, a focused expression on her face.

My feelings were all over the place. I couldn't lie to myself and say that I didn't like how she was with me right now. So many times I had dreamed of her giving up the bullying and just seeing me as a person, a guy she could like.

And it was finally happening. I didn't even care about her boyfriend. I wanted Paige to keep treating me like I was the most precious thing in the world for her even if she'd only begun this charade because she'd probably been jealous over me and her best friend.

"All done," she said softly, going over to the bathroom to replace all the items before coming back to sit beside me.

Her thigh was touching mine and her bare arm was brushing against my side. I shifted away quickly though it was the last thing on earth I wanted to do, spotted her notepad and a pencil lying around on the bed amongst some other books and grabbed them to scribble down a quick thank you and good night.

Paige read it with her brows furrowed.

“You really want to go?” she asked in a disappointed tone and looked up at me.

I stared at her while going through a serious internal conflict. I didn’t *want* to go but I knew I *should*.

“Playing hard to get, huh?” she teased me then with a twinkle in her eyes while twirling a lock of blonde hair around a finger.

God, she looked so cute. The stupid smitten side of me hoped that this actually was the real Paige Hamilton. Sweet and adorable. Into me.

I rubbed my bandaged hands over my thighs, suddenly feeling self-conscious because her gaze had shifted from my face to my chest where it lingered.

“Do you want me to say it, Oliver?” she whispered, looking deeply into my eyes again. “Do you want to hear from my lips the real reason why I’m paying you so much attention?”

When I didn’t respond, she shifted closer to me and lifted her fingers to my hair again. I really liked it when she did that. So much that I wished she wouldn’t. It made me crave other things from her as well.

“I like you, okay,” she admitted then and chewed on her lip. “I like you and I felt jealous seeing you with Rayne. I’ve been so stupid and mean so I get why you don’t trust me but I can’t help how I feel about you.”

Those wayward fingers of hers trailed down my neck slowly and caressed my collarbone. Her breath was warm on my shoulder as she leaned in and I started to grow hard again. Her touch, proximity and words combined to bring me to a state of arousal and it was almost euphoric. To be able to feel this way with Paige, to imagine the possibilities.

“I’ll break up with Rhys,” she told me suddenly and I turned my face to study her expression.

Our lips were so close.

“Please, Oliver,” she said, her other hand creeping over my thigh. “I’m prepared to grovel.”

She didn’t have to. I couldn’t bear to watch her do that. Not Paige. Not over me. But I still couldn’t bring myself to accept her kiss for some reason so I averted my face again and for the second time that week, her lips brushed against my jaw, sending a jolt of lust across my body. Every part of me was on edge and completely aware of her.

She could be mine. I wouldn’t treat her like Rhys. I’d be good to her. I wanted that for us despite the fact that there were so many obstacles.

So with those insistent thoughts in my brain, I made up my mind to do something I never believed I would get a chance to do. I kissed her. But on the cheek. Her skin was warm and soft

under my lips and Paige sucked in a breath before her eyes shot to mine as I slowly moved away.

“Okay, so you’re allowed to steal kisses and be a tease but won’t let *me* touch you?” she asked lightly.

I gave her an amused look and then reached for her hand to lift it and place it back in my hair where I liked it. She could touch me. I just wasn’t ready for her kiss yet.

Her lips quirked at my action and her eyes lit up with something I could only call excitement. I was getting pretty excited too if the bulge in my jeans was anything to go by.

Paige parted her lips as we stared at each other, some sort of force locking us in place. Her other hand was suddenly on my chest and I found it difficult to keep my breathing steady. Nobody had ever touched me like this before. Well, apart from Simon who’d groped my dick but this kind of intimacy, with someone I liked, was new to me.

I wanted it all. I mean, what else did I have to look forward to in life? There was desolation everywhere. She was starting to become my happy place.

Her hand moved further down to my stomach and I felt like closing my eyes and simply enjoying how good it felt but I also wanted to watch her face. Believe this was real.

The house was so quiet and we could hear each other breathing. As though everything had paused for this very moment. When her fingers reached the buttons of my jeans, I tensed and she pressed closer to me.

“You’re really hot, you know that?” she sighed as if she hated to admit it so I frowned at her uncertainly.

I guess I must be. I mean, I wasn't vain and didn't care to check my reflection in the mirror all the time but if she thought it was worth commenting on, I wasn't going to complain.

“Do you want me to?”

I didn't understand exactly what she was asking me but I swallowed nervously and simply nodded like a moron. Maybe she just wanted to keep touching me like this and that was fine but what she did instead was to use both her hands to unbutton my jeans, unzip me and then pull the fabric down a little until my dick, which was now fully erect, was exposed to her.

I froze for a second, not sure whether to follow my instinct to tuck myself back in and hide from her or let her look at me with obvious interest in her eyes before she moved to kneel in front of me.

I blinked several times, knowing what she intended to do now because I had heard the boys on the farm talk about their girlfriends sucking their cocks and how it was the best feeling in the world.

I didn't want her to *not* do it, I guess but it was all happening so fast. Just yesterday, I hadn't even wanted her to hold my hand and today she had touched me, washed my hair and was now about to blow me all because she liked me.

Though I wasn't experienced when it came to sex, I was aware of what a guy was supposed to do. I just hadn't ever done it. Who would I have done it with? Simon?

I hissed suddenly when she wrapped a fist around my length and began to stroke me. My own fists clutched at the sheets of

her bed as my balls tightened and my blood warmed even more. It felt amazing and the sight and feel of her hand on my cock held my rapt attention.

“It’s beautiful,” Paige said to me with a glimmer of mischief in her eyes and I almost whimpered. Almost.

My stomach muscles tensed when she brought her head forward and her mouth hovered above the head of my dick. Anticipation and desire rolled through me and my jaw went a little slack because breathing was really difficult now.

And then she did something even more shocking for my virgin eyes and brain. Slowly, she let a trickle of saliva fall out of her mouth onto my cock and I gasped, swallowing hard at the unbearable sensation. I couldn’t make myself look away.

Everything she did had me hooked. I wished I could say her name. It was on the tip of my tongue but I bit down on it and made it disappear, clenching my jaw. This was torture.

And then it wasn’t because she began to lick me slowly all the way from the base to the top and then back down, taking her time, *tasting me*.

More. I wanted more.

Paige opened her mouth and sucked on my head and my eyes rolled at the exquisite pleasure bursting through me.

She moaned softly then. Like she was enjoying it and murmured something that sounded like, ‘You taste good’.

But I wasn’t sure because my ears were filled with the intensity of my pulse beats, blood rushing through my veins as my heart fought to keep up with the hormonal overload my body was suddenly experiencing.

Her mouth... God, her mouth.

So warm. Soft lips and wet cavern just swallowing and sucking over and over while she kept up the moans but not too loud because her parents might wake up.

A soft sound escaped my lips too surprising me so much. Paige was a little surprised too before she grinned at me and murmured, "You like it?"

I closed my eyes and nodded, not wanting her to see just how much I *did* like it. I craved it. How had I gone so long without it when other boys my age made it a regular part of their existence?

"Oliver, hold back my hair," she asked me in a whisper and with a slight frown, I brought my fingers to her soft hair and held it back from her face.

She smiled and grasped my dick again before she really went to work on it. I felt the movements of her bobbing head not just on my dick but in my hands as well and the rhythm tightened my balls even more. I wanted to hold them in my hands and give them some relief but Paige seemed to know that already because her other hand began to massage them slowly.

Increasing waves of pleasure made me dig my teeth hard into my bottom lip as she took me deeper and deeper into her mouth. Instinct made me want to move my hips upwards to stuff myself into that sweet, wet mouth even more but I restrained myself.

"Mmm. Are you close?" she asked me, kissing and pumping my erection like she wanted to worship it or something.

I was and I began to let her go so I could look for my shirt and let myself spill in it but Paige swallowed me again and sucked even harder, making me gasp for the final time before cum shot out of me straight down her waiting throat.

I felt like screaming, so intense was the orgasm and the feeling of her draining me, urging me on with her soft moans and hands on my balls and my stomach.

I braced on my elbows, threw my head back and breathed out hard, screwing my eyes shut while she coaxed my climax out of me completely, finally leaving me lying there on her bed, feet still on the floor and skin heated as she shifted slightly and then tucked me back again when I went soft.

I kept my eyes closed as I lay there, trying not to pant. I couldn't look at her. I felt so vulnerable and overwhelmed as I recovered from that orgasm she had given me. None of my wet dreams had ever felt like this. Those few times I had used my fist to give myself relief had never felt like this.

So dirty and forbidden because of what we were to each other but so good.

When she didn't say anything to me, I raised myself to a sitting position again and grabbed my t-shirt from the floor, rubbing a hand over my face.

"You can stay if you want," Paige said to me quietly and still, I avoided her eyes.

No. That would be too weird. And risky. And intimate. I almost scoffed at the way that sounded after what we had just done, what I had let her do to me. We hadn't even *kissed* but

she knew what my dick looked like and my cum tasted like. That was disturbing.

I stood up abruptly and Paige did too before grabbing a blanket and pressing it into my hands.

“Just in case you need some extra,” she said.

I nodded my thanks and started to leave but then she told me to wait, opened her bedside drawer and handed me the phone she had taken from me. Automatically, I scowled at the device, wanting nothing to do with it but she sighed impatiently and closed my palm over it.

“Please just take it. I promise you can keep it this time. I’m sorry okay.”

I just walked over to her door without responding, wanting to get out of there. The blowjob had felt good. But there were all these unpleasant feelings inside me now. All these doubts and questions. What did she really want from me?

“Oliver?”

The way she said my name stopped me in my tracks and finally, I made myself meet her gaze. Her eyes were serious and soft, her pink lips were swollen and the image of her wrapped around my cock flashed in front of my eyes.

“Don’t use that to text Rayne.”

We looked at each other as I let her words sink in. She sounded possessive of me and I wasn’t sure how to feel about that. I didn’t nod or anything but turned and walked out, going straight to my hellhole, intending to go to sleep and not think about what had just happened in that room.

Chapter Eighteen

Paige

It had been so easy, it was almost disappointing. I'd thought he'd be more of a challenge. I'd thought it would at least take me a few nights of seduction attempts and playing nice. And I definitely thought he would freak out on me when he kept refusing to let me kiss him.

Flopping back on the bed, I rolled my eyes and thought how it was no surprise that he'd let me put my mouth on him without protest as soon as it was his dick on the receiving end of it.

I couldn't complain though because it wasn't like I hadn't enjoyed it myself. He had a nice cock. I mean, it was surprisingly well-groomed. Well-proportioned too. It hadn't been a chore. Rhys always made me gag on it but Oliver had been...less demanding, just happy to enjoy it as I set my own pace. I guess it helped that the guy was good-looking. I could see myself finding more pleasure in this than I had originally believed.

In fact, I was so wet right now and maybe if he had stayed, I would have done something about it with his help. Closing my eyes, I imagined it. I mean, I didn't *want* to obviously because I had a boyfriend but Oliver was just so fucking hot. His shirtless upper body, those tight, straining muscles and strong arms. He was so tall and muscular, he could easily be mistaken for a college kid instead of the seventeen year old he was.

A moan escaped me at the image I caught and held in my brain. The way he looked when I had him in my mouth, his

hands in my hair, gentle and hesitant. The feel of his own hair underneath my fingers, soft from the wash and smelling so good. So his tongue didn't have uses and sometimes, he was kind of arrogant and strange and maybe even a little naive. But he had a nice body and that for me, had many uses.

Rayne was never going to get any of that. No girl was until I was done using him. And then maybe whoever was stupid enough to want him could have my leftovers. Yeah.

My hand went inside my shorts as I thought about everything I was going to try with him tomorrow, how I could make the game even more interesting. Thrilling.

My life was so fucking boring. So perfect and pampered. I mean, I could slum it with the stable boy for a couple of weeks tops and entertain myself. Maybe his tongue *could* be of some use. I smiled at the idea, imagining him down there between my legs, licking and kissing my pussy.

“Fuck yes, Oliver,” I practised in a whisper.

I couldn't wait for our next 'hook-up'. Though he was cautious and tried to keep those boundaries up, he also wanted to believe me. He should count himself lucky that I even had the time of day to spare for someone of his status. That Paige Hamilton thought him worthy of her attention. He was going to be my bitch from now on. I'd leave him so ruined that he wouldn't ever dare to turn his nose up at me again or even think to look at another girl while ignoring me.

...

Rhys was looking at me funny the next day in school. In class, he kept nudging my elbow and putting his hand between my thighs until the teacher almost caught us.

“I hate you,” I informed him, half angry and half amused.

“Let’s go in here,” he said quickly once class was over and pulled me inside a storage closet.

“Jesus, Rhys, really?” I frowned at him exasperatedly.

“What? I’m horny,” he replied and backed me up into a corner, slipping his hands under my school skirt. “You haven’t met me for two nights now. What’s going on with you, Paige?”

He buried his face in my neck and I sighed, holding on to his wrists to prevent his hands from wandering further. I didn’t want to get in trouble.

“I had plans okay,” I told him.

He lifted his head then and frowned at me. “Rayne came over with her parents last night for dinner so I know you weren’t with her. And I’m always your ride, babe. What plans?”

I shrugged, avoiding his eyes.

“Paige Hamilton, you better tell me or I’m going to wrangle it out of you. *What plans?* You were at home. Like Daddy dearest will ever let you go anywhere on a school n-”

He trailed off and I looked up to see his eyes widen slightly as he put two and two together.

“Wait one fucking minute,” he breathed and started to grin slightly. “I heard dumbass moved into your place two nights

ago. Tell me this hasn't got something to do with him."

"What? No," I denied quickly. Too quickly.

He caught it at once. Rhys may be a jerk and obnoxious but he wasn't an idiot.

"Paige. Baby," he said with a fake celebrity smile his parents probably taught him. "Is there something you want to tell me?"

He wouldn't stop staring at me. And his hands held me in place firmly so I knew he wouldn't stop bothering me until he had all the answers. I rolled my eyes. Not like I cared what he thought anyway. This was my life. My decisions. I hadn't promised to marry him or anything.

"Okay, fine. I was with Oli...um...the stable boy, okay. It was no big deal. You know I hate him."

Rhys responded by clicking his tongue at me disapprovingly. "Jesus, Paige, stop torturing the poor guy. Haven't you put him through enough?"

I gave him a blank look, waiting for him to burst out laughing or snort or chuckle and sure enough, he did a few seconds later.

"I hope you didn't go too easy on him."

My lips formed a smirk. "Do you realize who you're talking to, Walton?"

He bit his lip while grinning and then leaned in to kiss me. "That makes me even hornier. Come here."

"Rhys, no. I have a class."

I pushed him away and this time, he let me go, blowing out a breath and looking at me soberly. I knew he wasn't actually upset. Rhys and I were only fooling around. There were no serious, intense feelings here. We were bored rich kids with nothing better to do and our relationship was more habit than anything else.

"I'll come over," he said as I checked to see if the hallway was empty.

"No. I'm busy tonight," I said tightly.

He grabbed my arm and made me look at him. "Come on, Paige. I'm fucking bored. What are you planning this time? I want in."

I shook my head adamantly, shrugged him off and walked away quickly.

For some reason, even though I had enjoyed teaming up with Rhys and some other friends of ours to tease and torture Oliver in the past, this felt personal. This was my game and there were only two players allowed in it.

...

"Paige, honey, we're going to be out for a couple of hours. Will you be okay?" my father asked me that same evening at around eight.

I was in my room doing homework and nodded at him as he stood in the doorway with his hands in his pockets, all dressed

up for a formal dinner. I was proud of him. I mean, we hadn't started off well but he had made a name for himself until we ended up being one of the richest families of Dreamhaven. People looked up to him now and my mother got invited to all the important social outings and parties Cedarfield was known for. I mean, we would have moved there if Dad wasn't so attached to his farm and determined to build a legacy.

"I'm always okay, Dad," I assured him with a smile while my heart raced inside and I tried to keep the excitement from my tone. "Love you. Have fun."

He smiled back at me and walked off. He was strict with me for a reason and I understood that. I tried my best not to let him down, to prove I could live up to his expectations but sometimes, girls just wanted to have fun. Like right now, for instance.

Seconds after my parents' car left the driveway, I flopped down on the bed, abandoning the studies my father insisted I dedicate myself to on week nights and picked up my phone to text Oliver. I mean, I could go see him instead, he was right there in the basement but I was too lazy. I wanted him to come to me. That's what pets were for.

I jumped up in surprise when there was a knock on my door just two seconds after I sent the text to him. Was he like waiting for me to call him up or something or did he simply think he could come to my room anytime now if my parents weren't home?

Feeling a little irritated but still not enough to curb my naughty excitement, I padded over to the door and flung it open.

“Rhys,” I gasped when I saw who was standing on the other side.

He smirked at me devilishly and walked inside without waiting for me to invite him.

“Hey, babe.”

I shut the door quickly and turned to frown at him. “What the fuck, Rhys? You can’t just show up here whenever you feel like it.”

He fell back on my bed like he owned it as usual and put his arms behind his head. “Sweetheart, I can. You gave me a key, remember? And last I checked, I was still your boyfriend.”

I was panicking. Oliver could be here any minute. He hadn’t texted me back but then he was a man of few words. Or no words. Whatever. Rhys had extremely bad timing. I hated that he never listened to me. Spoilt, rich brats tended to act like that. I should know.

“You can’t be here,” I said to him almost pleadingly and he sat up and frowned at me.

“Paige, what is going on with you? Your parents just left. I’ve been waiting outside for twenty minutes because I know they are having dinner with the St. James in Cedarfield. Why can’t I be here?” he demanded loudly.

“Keep your voice down,” I hissed at him, my eyes huge and frustrated.

He was going to ruin everything. If Oliver found out he was here...

There was a knock on my door and I froze, staring at Rhys with panicked eyes. He stared back for a second before a slow, shit-eating grin spread across his face.

‘You naughty girl,’ he mouthed at me and I chewed on my lip and debated what to do.

‘Please. Go away,’ I begged him by forming the words with my lips and he shook his head while still grinning.

‘No fucking way,’ he mouthed back, the asshole and winked at me before getting up to walk over to my closet.

My mouth fell open and I tried to stop him but the knock on my door was louder this time and I gritted my teeth as Rhys stepped inside and left the closet door open just a tiny inch. God. If I went out and took Oliver back to the basement, the fucker was just going to follow us and make trouble. I knew that. That’s what he did. And I had to remember that we were dating each other so leaving him here to go hook up with the stable boy was out of the question. I had to talk to Oliver in here and maybe send him away after a few minutes so he’d still think I’m interested but maybe just tired or something.

“Hi,” I said cheerily as I pulled open the door, smiling broadly at him.

Rhys better keep quiet in there otherwise I was going to fucking strangle him.

Oliver studied me quietly for a moment and I stepped aside to let him in. He passed by and I inhaled his...whoa...wait... was he wearing the cologne I left for him in the basement this morning before I headed off to school? He had already left to

do farm work at sunrise so I couldn't give it to him but I guess he saw it and decided to use it.

It only added to his appeal. He wore a hoodie and ripped jeans and that soft, overgrown hair made me want to drag my fingers through it again. Damn. Why did he have to be so damn attractive? Rhys was going to have a complex when he saw this guy up close tonight and realized how well he cleaned up.

Said guy handed me a note then and I opened it to find the words, *Thanks for the cologne. I can't stay long. We're working on the far side of the property tomorrow and I need to leave before sunrise. I'm really tired.*

And he couldn't have *texted* me this? I refrained from the urge to roll my eyes and made myself say, "No problem. I'm kind of tired myself. I just thought you'd want to hang out some."

For a moment, we just stood there, wondering what to do. As usual, I could feel the tension and chemistry between us but Rhys was there so seducing Oliver was out of the question.

"Did you have a nice day?" I asked him with a forced smile before walking over to the bed and sitting down.

Then I cringed slightly. Do farm boys have nice days? I mean as far as I knew, they worked him like a slave from dawn till dusk and he got blisters and got tired as fuck and had to make do with meager meals.

Oliver came over to sit next to me, so close that his arm brushed against mine and his body heat seeped into me. I had the strangest reaction then. My pussy clenched instinctively

and the attraction was so fucking strong, I barely stopped myself from grabbing his face and kissing the hell out of him whether he allowed it or not.

The memory of his cock and his surrender from last night came rushing back and my gaze flicked to his crotch before I dragged it away to meet his eyes. He was frowning at me and I wasn't sure if it was because of anger or something else.

“What?” I questioned warily.

‘You okay?’ he mouthed to my surprise. The second time he had done that with me.

This was something I never knew he could do. I mean, he'd never tried to talk to me before even if I couldn't hear his voice. It made me feel strange. It made me want to know the reason why he wasn't able to speak. Was it due to an injury or something else?

“Yeah.” I gave a nervous laugh and looked away. “I'm all right.”

His calloused fingers tipped my chin back towards him while I stared up at his face and into those serious, dark eyes. So full of emotion.

‘Are you sure?’ he mouthed this time, not letting me look away.

Holy shit, this was getting a little too intense for my tastes. I mean, he was just so...I don't know...intuitive, I guess? Sensitive? Attuned to my feelings. Or was it just the way he was? Rayne said he was sweet and sensitive too when she had been yapping about him in school that day.

“I'm totally fine.”

I shifted away from him so he was forced to drop his hand. It was so awkward, with Rhys right there listening to us and watching us like some creep.

My phone beeped and I peeked at it to see that Rhys had texted me. Quickly, I turned it upside down and glanced at Oliver but he was looking away from me now and hadn't noticed, thank god.

Another text pinged and I just knew it was my boyfriend. He'd keep doing it until I replied so I snatched the phone up, gave Oliver a quick smile and said, "Please stay. I'm just going to change and I'll be right out."

Looking over my shoulder to check that he was not watching as I walked to the closet, I went inside quickly and shut the door, glaring at Rhys while he stood there lazily leaning against a wall and smirking at me.

'What the fuck is wrong with you?' I mouthed angrily.

He cocked his head at me and then looked down to type something on his phone.

A text came through and I winced before putting it on silent mode and then reading the message.

What are you doing, Paige? He's putty in your hands. Play with him a little. Rhys had texted.

I rolled my eyes and texted back. **We're just talking.**

I glanced up at Rhys as he read my reply and typed another message.

Boring.

Huffing out a breath, I pinned him with an irritated stare.

Rhys frowned at me curiously before typing something else.

You. Like. Him.

My mouth fell open and I shook my head, scowling at him. 'No, I don't,' I mouthed furiously. He was nuts.

My boyfriend just smiled at me arrogantly. 'Oh, Paige,' he mouthed back. 'I'm so sorry.'

I gritted my teeth and texted him again.

I do not like him, okay! Are you nuts? I hate him. I just want to teach him a lesson, that's all. It's just a game.

He nodded as if he didn't believe me and replied.

Prove it.

My stomach knotted up a little when I glimpsed the mischievous look on his face. The look of a guy up to no good.

If it's really just a game, then fucking play with him, Paige. I want to watch you do it. I. Dare. You.

I was really on the spot here. Rhys was insane. And evil. I knew exactly what he wanted to watch, the pervert. And I knew if I didn't go along with it or showed signs of being against it, he would be convinced that I actually had feelings for Oliver or something. He'd tell everybody. He'd never let me forget it.

'Fine,' I mouthed, shooting him a mean look, a determined look before walking out of the closet and striding over to Oliver. It was no big deal. He *was* putty in my hands and it wouldn't even take that long.

Oliver gave me strange look when I stood in front of him and I frowned.

“What?”

He studied me for a while and then glanced towards the closet. I held my breath but he only looked back at me and gestured at my clothes.

I swallowed nervously. Right. I was supposed to have changed in there.

“You know what? I realized I kind of like this dress,” I told him with another fake smile and sat next to him, real close. “Are *you* okay, by the way?” I asked, faking my interest too and batting my eyelashes at him.

Oliver simply shrugged, a faint smile playing around his sensuous lips. Wait did I just call his lips ‘sensuous’? Why in hell was I getting so poetic over this guy’s facial features?

Clearing my throat, I laced his fingers with mine and let out an exaggerated sigh.

“Actually, I was lying about me being okay, you know,” I murmured, looking at how my pale, small hand appeared in his bigger, tanned one.

And then I started admiring his forearm and how strong and veiny it looked. Shit. There was that tingling in my pussy again. Fuck Rhys. If he hadn’t put me on the spot like this and piled on all this pressure, I would have actually enjoyed seducing this guy.

I realized Oliver was frowning down at me again, waiting for me to elaborate, I guess, so I made a face and said, “Rhys was such a dick to me in school today when I told him it was over.”

I made my voice loud so the fucktard would hear but my attention was taken away from the closet when Oliver’s

fingers tightened on mine. He appeared angry, which made me stifle a smile upon seeing that he was playing right into my hands and I leaned my head on his shoulder. We stayed that way for about thirty seconds just listening to each other breathe.

“So...how long are you going to make me wait before I can kiss you?” I teased, pressing my thigh against his where our hands were joined.

He brought his other hand up to my face and with the softest of touches, caressed my jaw. I peeked up at him from beneath my lashes, acting all demure and flirty while staring at his lips.

I really wanted to kiss him. Just know what it would be like. The way he kept pulling away only made me want him more.

And then it happened. He angled his face slightly and moved closer until his lips were touching mine. I gasped at the contact because I hadn't expected him to just do it and I definitely hadn't expected the burn of lust spreading across my entire body. Jesus, he wasn't even kissing me properly. It was just a peck and I was melting here.

I let go of his hand and brought both my arms up to curl around his neck, parting his lips and sucking on the bottom one. Fuck. That felt good. It was a sensation that set my whole body on fire. When I did the same to his upper lip, he began to respond, kissing me back hesitantly and slowly, like he was trying to follow my lead while his hands slid down to rest on my hips.

Fuck, just take me now, I wanted to demand but I curbed that desperation and focused on our kiss instead because I didn't want to spook him.

Rhys was hot as fuck and yet, not even sex with him had made me feel half as turned on as kissing Oliver had. It was unbelievable. Firmly, I pushed Rhys out of my head and just gave in to the exhilarating feelings of the moment.

My fingers played with his hair and I tasted his mouth by letting my tongue curl around his. It was kind of cute that he waited a few seconds for me to try something new before doing the same. I felt like giggling at that but again, I didn't want to embarrass him. It was obvious he'd never done this with anyone before but it didn't bother me. It made me feel safe with him and kind of flattered that I was going to be his first.

As soon as the thought entered my head, I shut it down. *What the fuck, Paige?*

He was my prey and I was supposed to be teaching him a lesson here not getting all mushy over one damn kiss. *He* should feel flattered that someone like me had even deigned to let him kiss her. He was the enemy. The one beneath me. The one I was never going to let get the best of me. That was it.

Determined and fueled by my resolution, I decided to shred my good girl hesitant act and go in for the kill. I had never been a good girl and he knew that better than anyone.

As for him being a good guy, well...teenage boys everywhere were pretty much the same. It just took a little more effort with boys like Oliver.

I pulled away from him and slowly backed up on the bed, tugging on his hand and never breaking eye contact. His own

eyes were wide, lips glistening with my kisses and he was breathing fast.

Take the bait, Oliver. Do what any guy in your place would do right now. Don't be different.

He moved towards me slowly and the strangest thing was seeing an almost painful look enter his eyes. It wasn't the 'I want sex so badly' kind of pain that horny people got. This was real pain. And I wasn't sure what to make of it.



Chapter Nineteen

Oliver

I sat in the basement after having come down from Paige's room and finally, finally, I let my tears fall.

Last night had been one of the most exquisite yet painful experiences of my life. I always knew people could be cruel from a young age but this time, I was hoping maybe life would cut me a break.

That maybe she did care about me and had seen something inside me worth cherishing. People tended to treat you like you lacked intelligence just because you lacked a certain ability, like talking. They thought being mute equaled being stupid. She was no different.

I'd heard her talking to Rhys before I knocked on her door last night. I'd known he was hiding in the closet the whole time. I hadn't wanted to be part of their sick games and thought I'd just spend a little time with Paige and leave. My heart had craved to see her and hear her voice after the way we had left things the other night.

For some reason, I'd needed reassurance that whatever had happened was because she liked me and not because she was playing with me.

And when she'd kissed me, I had wanted that too.

But I never expected her to take it so far as to get me to have sex with her while her boyfriend was right there in the room. Like it hadn't been about me at all but just her putting on a show for his benefit. Using me.

I rubbed at my eyes and crushed the familiar tight, forceful feeling in my chest, breathing hard and rocking slightly as I sat on the couch, my jaw clenched.

A part of me had thought she would stop in the middle of it. That she would realize how wrong it was and apologize to me or make some excuse and back out but she'd carried on like it didn't matter.

And still, my stupid heart had continued to please her, to give her what she wanted and try to make it beautiful for her. Hearing the word 'baby' fall from her lying lips had tasted like the sweetest poison. She hadn't even bothered to cover us and I'd had to drag the sheets over our naked bodies, trying to preserve some of my dignity even as she carried on with her campaign to shred whatever was left of it.

That same stupid heart had believed that my feelings for her, my treatment of her might somehow make her see how things could be between us. How real and incredible it could be. I don't know if it even worked or not. All I knew was that I had let her win while knowing it would result in my pain.

I'd let her take what she wanted from me, treat me how she wanted, praying and wishing that my love for her could make her better. Somehow.

More tears rolled down my cheeks and I dragged in deep, ragged breaths. Yeah I was a guy but I still hadn't wanted my first time with anyone to be part of some sick joke or prank. I'd given her something that meant so much to me and she'd been having fun with it the whole time.

What did that make me? How desperate was I really for acceptance from her that I allowed her to do this to me?

More importantly, how naive was I to think that she would ever change for me? She wouldn't. Nothing would change between us no matter how much I wished for it. She'd just found a new way to make me feel like a dog. She wouldn't kick me around anymore but call me to her to watch me and gloat as I licked the crumbs off her fingertips.

I swallowed hard and dragged my hands through my hair, feeling disillusioned and numb. I should never have wished for more. For better. I was never going to get that lucky and I knew that now. I should never have forgotten my place, forgotten the cold, hard facts of my daily life.

That the world was my hell and she ruled it like the devil.

And the worst part of it all was that...I let her.

~ ~ ~

Chapter Twenty

They were fighting again. Loud voices, things crashing against the wall or on the floor. Words like 'bitch', 'whore', 'fuck' floating around like confetti. Except it wasn't pretty or sparkling. It just hurt.

"I'm gonna end this tonight," the man vowed through gritted teeth suddenly from the next room. "I am so fucking tired of you getting on my nerves! EVERY FUCKING DAY it's the same shit."

The woman cried out and there was a thump which made the ten year old boy lying down in the next room clench his fists and screw his eyes shut tightly.

Just let her be okay, he thought. Please let her be okay. Please let him go to sleep.

"No. No, Greg, stop. Don't do this!" the woman shrieked suddenly, her voice coated with terror this time instead of pain and anger. "We have a child."

"That retard is no child of mine!" the man roared.

"You made him that way, you bastard!" she screamed back. She cried out again when there was a thwack as if the man had slapped her.

There was a high-pitched wail after that and then silence.

Complete and utter silence which continued for longer than was normal between his parents.

He didn't want to go and see why his mother wasn't screaming anymore, why there was no more fighting and name-calling from his father's side. But he couldn't bring himself to remain in the room either, even though he knew the man didn't want to look at him, wanted him to remain invisible. Unseen. Unheard.

But he always made sure his mother was okay. Always. Even if he got beaten up for it. It was scary but greater than the fear was his concern for his mother.

When he entered the room, however, and his eyes took in the chaos, he sucked in huge mouthfuls of air and opened his mouth to scream but no sound came out. This time, no sound came out. Not even a whisper.

For ten years, he had been conditioned to remain silent by the man who pretended to raise him. For ten years, he got a slap or a punch or heavy threats every time he so much as opened his mouth to say one word. For ten years, his mother got beaten up because he asked for something or said something which made the man aware of his presence in the house so the boy had simply stopped speaking. To protect the one person he loved and himself too, he had sacrificed his freedom of speech. He didn't even need it anymore. Didn't even know what that ability was, why it was important, why it even mattered. This was who he was now.

The boy who didn't speak.

But his cheeks were wet with tears and his lungs were screaming inside, telling him to shout, to say something. As

always, he pushed that feeling down. At his age, he didn't know anything about trauma but he did know self-preservation. Don't talk, don't get abused. That was the deal in this house.

But now everything was broken. His mother lay on the floor amidst shards of glass with blood coming out of her stomach and her eyes dead and sunken, staring at him unseeingly, her body limp. Lifeless.

He mouthed the word, 'Mom' but there was no voice to go along with it.

The man who was busy downing a bottle of alcohol finally spotted him and narrowed his eyes.

"Oliver," he growled and curled his fingers for the boy to come closer.

The boy didn't know what to do. The man never called him by his name. Never. It was always, 'Shut up and get out.' And when he had learned to shut up, it was, 'Get out, boy.'

He stood there and swallowed, wanting to go to his mother but unable to move his feet.

"Come here, boy," the man called again, losing his patience.

The child moved a few feet inside the room before the man was on him, grabbing his collar and flinging him into an empty sofa. Oliver cowered, bracing himself for a blow but it didn't come.

The man peered down at him with black, devil eyes, ignoring his wife's corpse.

“I need to do some cleaning up now,” he said to the boy in a slurred voice. “Need to take out the trash. You’ll help me clean up as well and then we will talk about what to do after.”

He pointed a warning finger at the boy, a warning to stay put while he went out of the room.

There was no time. He wanted to go to his mother and weep. He wanted to try and escape while the man was busy. He wanted to call the cops. He did not want to sit there and be afraid and listen to the man, or help him just because he feared for his safety.

He’d lived in this house for years and knew monsters were real and not capable of changing. His mother had told him that she stayed because she needed to keep Oliver safe. Because if she tried to leave, the man will hunt them down and kill them both.

He’ll kill me.

The boy knew that as surely as he knew his mother was now gone and never coming back. He will kill me after I help him.

Wasting no time, not giving himself a moment to reconsider, he got up and sprinted towards the shelves in the far side of the room, searching, searching for the bottle his mother had shown him once.

‘I wish I could put this in his drink,’ she’d said with hatred in her tone. ‘Then we could get rid of him forever.’

She had not meant to say that out loud but Oliver had been playing in the room and he had heard. He always listened and observed even when his father and the other kids at school told him he was dumb.

'But I'm not brave enough,' she had uttered sadly. 'The police will take me away, Oliver and then I won't be able to care for you.'

More tears fell and the child gasped, dashing at them, telling himself to stop it or else he will never escape. He will die tonight just like his mother. At last he found the poison and raced with it to the alcohol the man had left behind, opening up the tiny bottle in his hands and pouring the contents in his drink.

He heard footsteps and gulped down his panic, his heart beating wildly inside his chest as he tucked himself back into the sofa, hiding the empty plastic bottle under his legs.

'What if he doesn't die?' he thought, feeling afraid. 'I should have tried to run away instead.'

The man was wearing gloves now and carried some garbage bags and a knife. Oliver felt vomit rise up in his throat and swallowed over and over trying to make his presence scarce.

'Get up,' the man said, pinning him with a dangerous look.

He stood slowly, his heart pounding and palms sweaty, his tears hidden now because it might anger the man. The bottle containing the small amount of alcohol and too much poison was picked up and its contents gulped down in a single swallow.

The man froze and so did Oliver, widening his eyes at his abuser before he began to back off until he was met with a wall behind him.

He earned a glower from the man who wiped his mouth and said, 'What the fuck was that?'

There was no way to escape, the man was blocking the doorway and the windows were locked this time of the night. He glanced at his mother's dead body again and wondered if it would be so bad if he did join her after all but then the man began to choke a little.

His eyes bulged and he grabbed his throat, his features twisting grotesquely. Oliver stared, not knowing what else to do as he watched the man collapse to the floor on his knees, still clutching his throat and making choking, strangled sounds. He watched until the last minute when finally, finally, after some writhing and whimpering, the man joined his mother on the floor and lay completely still.

Confused, alone and in pain, the boy slid down the wall and landed on the floor with a thud, unable to take his eyes off the bodies. Maybe life would be better now without the constant chaos in his home, he thought.

But the chaos in his mind...that was never going away. It was never going to come out either. A thing forever trapped inside him. Just like his voice.

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## Chapter Twenty-One

### Paige

Once again, I couldn't get Oliver out of my head while I was in school. But he obviously wasn't thinking about me because I'd sent him three texts already and he hadn't responded to any of them. My friends were all over me and wouldn't stop talking about finals and movies and stuff like that. I should be paying attention to the current gossip and conversation but my mind was stuck on Oliver. On last night. Everything we did together.

...

*I didn't waste time before kissing him again once he was lying next to me, bringing his hands to rest on my waist. God, he felt good against me. I didn't even care that we weren't alone anymore. I just wanted to feel this.*

*He was definitely stronger and I liked that. I liked how small I felt against his broader frame, the scent of him and his warmth. So good.*

*"Please touch me," I whispered into his mouth between kisses, writhing against him, the roughness of his jeans on my smooth legs turning me on even more. "Push up my dress, Oliver. I want to feel your hands there."*

*He stilled for a moment and I thought he would refuse but then I felt the brush of cool air against my bare thighs and ass as his hands pushed up my dress and stroked my skin.*

*“Mmm,” I moaned softly and pulled him tighter against me, knowing it wasn’t going to take more than that to get me all wet and horny.*

*It was kind of frustrating though because he wasn’t doing what I wanted him to do and I realized that I would probably have to guide him or something.*

*I broke the kiss to lower the straps of my dress and expose my breasts to him, watching for his reaction.*

*“God, I’m so hot for you,” I told him, rubbing one leg up and down his thigh and hooking the other around his hip. “Put your mouth there?”*

*Oliver raised himself a little and then shifted, confusing me when he went to lie on my other side and covered my body with his, bringing his lips down to my boobs hesitantly.*

*I clutched at his shoulders and moaned again because it felt amazing, the way he took my nipples into his warm mouth one by one and suckled them gently. I didn’t even care that Rhys was watching anymore. I mean, he couldn’t really see me because Oliver was in his line of sight but whatever...*

*I was determined to enjoy this. It may be a game but it was proving to be a damn delicious one.*

*I tugged at Oliver’s shirt and got him to take it off before I lay there and admired his form. I had seen the guy shirtless countless times before but not like this. Up close and able to touch those hot as fuck pecs and hard chest. My panties grew*

*even wetter at the sight and I leaned in to run my tongue over his skin.*

*He let out a sigh and I smirked at him, capturing his lips again.*

*“Do you know how to fuck, Oliver?” I asked him in a mocking tone. It was obvious that the answer was no.*

*But he surprised me by reaching down to unbutton his jeans and then take them off, almost angrily. I giggled a little, thinking that he didn't have the patient to wait but that wasn't it. Because once he was naked, he pulled the sheets over us and continued to kiss me, learning and exploring my body. He kissed my mouth, my cheeks, my shoulders and my neck. Then he returned to my breasts and suckled, running his rough hands over them slowly as if he was afraid to hurt me.*

*At first, it amused me but then when I noticed just how seriously he was behaving, I forgot all about laughing at him. His actions weren't experienced but he wasn't nervous either. He really wanted to do this but he wasn't rushing through it like Rhys always did.*

*When Oliver pushed my dress up some more and kissed my stomach, I bucked a little and let out a sound of pleasure, feeling his lips trace my skin, his tongue doing the same. Wait, was he...?*

*I didn't have to think long before he pushed my panties aside and went down on me, making me cry out slightly.*

*“Oh, shit,” I said and closed my eyes as he ate me out.*

*It was frustrating because he was so gentle with me, licking and sucking on my pussy like it was some damn delicate*

*flower. Even my first time hadn't been this romantic. Or slow and passionate.*

*I'd lost it to Rhys in the backseat of his car and he'd calmly thrown away the condom and told me to get dressed because his father expected him to be home for their weekly family dinner.*

*I turned my face aside and bit my lip, my fingers lazily running through Oliver's hair.*

*"That feels good, Oliver. God, that feels so good," I told him, just giving in to the enjoyment.*

*Slow was good sometimes, right?*

*And then he slid up my body until he was hovering over me, his eyes so dark in the dim bedroom light, asking me for permission, his jaw glistening and biceps straining. I felt his dick nudging me and let my legs fall open to accommodate his hips.*

*Oliver didn't move for several seconds, just gazed down at me like he wanted to tell me something. What? What was he trying to say?*

*My heart skipped a beat at the intensity of his look but I told myself not to care. To keep playing the game. So I reached down and stroked him and he tensed, his lips parting to release a rough breath.*

*"I want it in me," I told him in a whisper, kissing him lightly on the jaw. "Please, baby."*

*He closed his eyes then, gripped my hip with one hand while holding his dick in the other and started to push himself inside me. I brought up my own hands to run them over his shoulders*



*and his arms. Oliver buried his face in my neck, biting my skin as he thrust, slowly, carefully, breathing raggedly.*

*My pussy stretched around him and I groaned deeply before smiling at the good feeling that only came with sex.*

*“Go faster,” I urged him and he obliged me like a good boy, moving his hips quicker and more urgently.*

*It was then that I remembered condoms and cursed inwardly. How could I have forgotten? I never forget with Rhys even if I was on the pill. But then Rhys was a slut and Oliver wasn't so I stopped worrying.*

*“Don't come inside me,” I whispered to him, just to be safe, and his response was to raise his head and kiss me, crushing my mouth under his while he pounded me.*

*It was getting so good, so fucking good because he was letting go but then Rhys chose that moment to walk out of the closet and venture towards the bed, standing there and just watching us.*

*I widened my eyes at him, trying to keep myself from stiffening against Oliver while he fucked me, and then glared at Rhys. My boyfriend just stood there and observed us for a few more seconds before he gave me that famous smirk and winked. His last gesture to me as he quietly opened the door and slipped out was to blow me a kiss while another guy continued to screw me.*

*It was enough to put me out of the mood. Oliver tensed slightly before he pulled out and gasped, squeezing his dick with his hand and spilling his cum on top of my stomach while holding himself up with one arm.*

*I stared at the liquid on me with equal parts disgust and fascination. I'd never let Rhys make a mess on me that way. It was always in the condom, every time, unless I blew him. Another guy's jizz was on my body and I decided that I didn't exactly hate it. It felt so new and intimate. Kind of sexy.*

*What the fuck?*

*He moved off me and lay down on his back, panting next to me while I kept staring at the jizz, wondering what to do. What in the world did I just do?*

*We turned to face each other at the same time and I couldn't even say anything. I just watched him while he watched me back with drowsy, satisfied eyes. Then his gaze shifted to my stomach where his cum still rested and he inhaled a little bit, licking his lips.*

*God, he looked so sexy. His hair was sticking to his forehead and I had the maddest urge to push it back gently, let my hand linger on his face and then kiss him.*

*I didn't know what was happening and didn't have time to analyze my reaction because I felt his hand on my tummy where he was using his t-shirt to wipe the mess he had made.*

*"Oliver," I said softly, puzzled and overwhelmed but he silenced me with a kiss.*

*It was so adoring and so...tender, his lips moving softly against mine. Shit. What the fuck was happening here?*

*When he finished cleaning me, he draped the sheets over me once more and bent to pull on his boxers and jeans. For a while, he sat there, looking like he wanted to leave but then*

*seemed to decide against it and joined me back in bed, pulling me into his body.*

*Cuddling with me.*

*He cradled me like I was some sort of precious treasure and kissed my forehead, keeping me in his arms until my eyes closed and I fell asleep.*

*Sometime later, I felt him move and cracked an eye open to realize that dawn was breaking in. My parents must be home already. Fuck.*

*Oliver climbed out of bed and cast one last glance over me before he walked out.*

And I hadn't been able to get him out of my mind since.

...

It was late afternoon when he finally deigned to show up at the barn. I was watching from my window and made my way out the door as soon as I spotted him, making sure no one else was around to see where I was headed.

All the workers must be at the quarters or gone home. It was funny how I'd never cared who saw me enter or leave the barn before but now I was feeling self-conscious. I mean if Dad figured out I was screwing the stable boy also known as his

foster son, he would go nuts. *Had* screwed, not *screwing*, I corrected myself. Last night was a one-off and I was going to laugh in his face as soon as I saw him again and let him know where he could stuff his silent treatment. Pun intended and all.

I stopped short though as soon as I was inside, my eyes adjusting to the dim interior where he hadn't turned on all the lights yet. He was washing himself at the stall, just his arms and face and I was staring.

His jeans hung low on his waist, just around his hips and I could see his bare upper body in all its glory. The sleek muscles and dips and even the barest beginnings of his backside.

My jaw dropped open a little because the sight was so hot.

Was this just because I'd had sex with him and touched that body, knew what it felt like when it was moving on top of me? Was this some sort of side effect of sex?

If it was, then why hadn't I felt this way with Rhys?

And Oliver hadn't even been that good. I hadn't even climaxed while I'd already made him come twice. He had no clue how to kiss properly. There was nothing special about this boy. Nothing.

He dropped his hands suddenly and our eyes met. My heart began to increase the rate at which it normally pumped blood and I didn't like it.

“You know, I get that you're busy and stuff but you could've at least replied to one of my texts,” I said loudly and approached him with a frown.

Oliver stepped away from the stall and ignored me, wiping himself off with his t-shirt.

Oh, god. I did *not* need to see that.

“Hey, I’m talking to you, Oliver.” I followed him to the back of the stables as he checked on the horses one by one.

He stopped abruptly and so did I, almost bumping into him.

His brown eyes, the ones that saw way too much, squinted down at me before he made a gesture with his hands. A gesture like he was texting. Then he shook his head briefly and pointed towards the house.

Oh. So he hadn’t brought the phone with him. Okay. That was a thousand times worse because *that* meant he didn’t even care if I texted him or not.

“You *could’ve* brought it with you. I mean, it’s not like they’re going to check your pockets or anything.”

His brow furrowed at my statement and he appeared kind of disturbed. I gaped at him. Did they seriously monitor his movements to such an extent? It was crazy. He wasn’t a... prisoner.

Quietly, he turned back to the horses and I stood there studying him, unsure of what to do or say. I knew he was going to take his time and prolong returning to the house until sunset. Not like he had much to look forward to in that basement.

And I didn’t want to leave either. I didn’t think my parents were going to go anywhere tonight so the chances of being able to spend it with Oliver were pretty slim. It was too risky inviting him to the room every night or going to see him in the

basement. I didn't want to get in trouble. Wait, what was I thinking? Hadn't I *just* decided that I was not going to sleep with him again?

But I kept thinking of last night and how much I'd liked it. Hadn't he? I mean, he was a guy. He'd just lost his virginity to me and I was standing right here but he didn't even care. Rhys would have been dragging me to some corner by now to get inside my pants.

But Rhys wasn't the one I wanted to touch.

My feet carried me to him even as I cursed my impulsiveness. I told myself I was doing this because I wanted to break down his arrogance one last time before I ended this. He obviously had not learned his lesson about ignoring me so the game wasn't over yet.

When he reached the end of the stables, I was right there beside him, ready to drag him into an empty stall. Oliver threw me a surprised look while I pulled him to myself and kissed him. Ignore *this*, you moron.

He kept his lips closed again and I remembered how miserly he was with his kisses so I nibbled on his neck instead. This time, despite having washed, he smelled sweaty and tasted like dirt but my crazy brain seemed to find that arousing for some reason because I was clawing at his jeans, wanting to feel him inside me again.

I liked that he was dirty and I wasn't. I wanted it all to rub off on me because it made me feel naughty. Fucking the help was never on my bucket list but I could make exceptions for him if it felt this good.

He only resisted me for about half a minute before those dirty hands of his were on my ass, kneading it and slipping inside my panties. I moaned loudly, the sound echoing in the quiet barn and that was when Oliver finally gave me his mouth, silencing me with a hard kiss. Like he didn't want anyone to hear.

I placed my hand over his, moving it up and down so that he was stroking me there. Once he picked up the rhythm, I let him continue on his own, those strong, calloused fingers of his rubbing up and down my slit.

“Yeah,” I breathed and squirmed against him, biting on his earlobe. “Just like that, Oliver. God, that feels amazing.”

I fisted his hair while he fingered me slowly and I helped by moving my hips like I was trying to fuck his hand. Fuck, I really needed to come this time.

“Keep going,” I moaned again, throwing my head back.

He was breathing hard and staring at me as he pressed me against the wood, the smell of hay and horses all around us.

One of the animals suddenly let out a neigh and I jumped a little. He didn't though. He only smiled at my reaction and lowered his head, sucking on my nipples through my dress.

“Oh my god, fuck,” I whispered. “I want to come. You have to make me come this time, okay. Please, baby.”

He seemed to really like it when I called him that because he sucked harder on my tits and used his other hand to squeeze my ass and then lift one of my legs to curl around his hip.

Shit. This was hot. So hot. And I was sweating now. My sweat was mixing with his, our breaths were becoming

synchronized and his hand and my pussy had become best friends.

Still it wasn't enough.

“Fuck me,” I whispered suddenly, placing my hand on his jaw and making him look at me. “Fuck me now, please. Just like you did last night.”

I kissed him gently before watching as he straightened and took his hand away, making me whimper. Hastily, he unbuttoned his jeans and pushed them down just a little.

It was awkward at first, getting our positioning right but finally he was thrusting inside me and I let out a growl of pleasure, not even caring how I sounded. He did though because he gasped and kissed me again, taking my muffled noises into his mouth.

It only took about five thrusts this time before I started coming and bit into his bottom lip, smiling at the feeling. Fuck yes.

He was looking at my face, like he was trying to figure out if I was there yet or not so I nodded at him and grinned. He responded by burying his nose in my hair and letting his load blow inside me.

I closed my eyes tightly and gulped in some much needed air, that new and wonderful feeling of having him come inside me totally blowing my mind. Oh my god. Oh my god, why did it feel so awesome? Him absolutely bare and his cum mixing with mine. I should be grossed out by that but strangely, I wasn't.



I had to get this guy condoms. *If* we ever did this again which I wasn't planning on. Not in the least.

Oliver pulled out of me too soon and gazed at me, all sweaty and stunned.

I sighed. "Relax, farm boy," I said flippantly and righted my clothes and hair. "I'm on the pill and clean. I never let Rhys fuck me without a condom."

As soon as I said that, the atmosphere in the stable changed. I stilled and so did he. Fuck. Why did I have to tell him that?

"Umm...can I borrow your t-shirt, please?" I asked quietly. "I don't have anything on me and I feel really sticky down there."

It was weird asking him to let me wipe on his t-shirt but I didn't want to walk back with that stickiness between my legs no matter how much I'd enjoyed it. He pulled up his jeans, zipped himself and then handed me his t-shirt which had fallen out of his pocket.

"Please look away," I whispered.

He turned his back on me and was about to walk off when there were loud, heavy footsteps at the door.

Oliver tensed at once before backing into me, then turning around and caging me with his body, pressing us both into the wall like he wished it would swallow us up.

Someone was there. Fuck.

"Here, boy," someone...*Simon*...called loudly from the entrance and then whistled, like he was calling a dog.

Except there were no dogs here-

I sucked in a breath and glanced up at Oliver's face. He wasn't looking at me but he seemed so scared and worried. I could feel his heart hammering against my own chest and swallowed at the fear I felt which was mirroring his own.

"Hey. Are you in here, boy?" Simon hollered again, sounding closer this time.

Oliver bit into his lower lip and I silently placed my hand on his chest, just above his heart.

"Where the fuck is this asshole?" Simon cursed angrily all of a sudden and we heard him kicking at something before marching out, muttering under his breath.

We remained still for a minute after he left and then Oliver straightened once more and backed away from me, making space for me to leave. His face was so pale and features taut. I didn't know what to say to him. He was almost an adult now so I didn't understand why Simon seemed to scare him so much. Unnerve him.

"I should go," I whispered, inching out of the stall.

Oliver nodded, not even bothering to look at me as I left quietly.

It did occur to me what a huge risk he was taking by having sex with me upon my insistence. I would probably get a stern lecture from my parents and some light punishment like being grounded and my indiscretion will be swept under the rug.

I didn't know what they would do to him if they ever found out.

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## Chapter Twenty-Two

### Oliver

It was raining one afternoon as I walked into the living room of the Hamilton's after a long work day. If you could call it work. Since they never paid me a single penny, I supposed slavery would be a more suitable term.

Leaving my muddy boots outside, I padded in wearing my socks and froze when I saw Paige and her friends lounging in the living room, having a laugh over snacks and sodas. Jesus. It was going to be that kind of day.

“Oh look, it's the mute kid,” her idiot boyfriend said, grinning at me like I was his long lost best friend. “Yo, come join us. We're so bored. Tell us how your day at the farm was. You can use gestures and stuff, we don't mind.”

I shrugged off my jacket and ignored him.

“Rhys, stop it, please. Don't be a jerk. And his name is Oliver,” I heard Rayne say to which Rhys and another friend of his snickered.

“Oh wow, really?” he replied, sounding delighted. “That's perfect. That's what my sister named our new dog so it's grown on me.”

After all these years, five to be exact, I should be used to such remarks but it cut every time. A simple thing called respect was so lacking in these rich kids. Respect for another human being's right to exist and live in peace.

"Last I checked, servants were supposed to use the back entrance," the other guy, Devon spoke up with a sneer.

Rhys hummed along with him and added, "Yeah, Paige. Does he think that just because he was allowed in some places he can do the same everywhere else?" Rhys taunted with a smirk that only meant he was referring to the fact that I'd slept with her.

Drawing in a patient breath, I was going to pass them by when I happened to glance over and my eyes caught Paige's. She stared up at me, all serious and I thought I detected something like longing in her gaze. We hadn't seen each other all week. I'd been slaving my ass off till it was almost dinner time because when Simon had not been able to find me that day, he had decided to punish me, accusing me of dodging my chores. Which meant longer hours, more exhaustion and no Paige.

Her parents had been home all week too so we didn't sneak in to see each other but we did text a few times every night while I could still manage to keep my eyes open before the sun was up again.

I was starting to miss her.

Everyone grew quiet all of a sudden as they noticed the way she and I were looking at each other. I couldn't really stop looking when she was doing the same and there was this

energy crackling in the room as images of me and her kissing and touching each other flitted through my mind.

“What the hell are you staring at, moron? Get out of here.”

That cold, taunting voice was unmistakably hers.

Paige widened her eyes at me almost as soon as she finished speaking and shook her head slightly as if to let me know she hadn't meant it.

Pain sliced across my chest anyway.

Hurt first, feel bad about it later. That seemed to be her modus operandi. I looked at the floor in disappointment and made myself walk away from them, the laughter of the boys carrying behind me and Rayne's admonishing voice scolding them.







## Chapter Twenty-Three

### Oliver

“So, what’s your favourite dessert?”

I took my attention away from the window and brought it back to Rayne where she sat opposite me, giving me one of her sweet smiles.

There was soft, pop music playing on the jukebox and laughter and conversation all around us. The restaurant she had brought me to was called *Joey’s* and was one of those casual hangouts selling fast food. I had been so relieved to see it when I’d gotten out of her car. I’d been thinking the entire drive that she would bring me somewhere classy or too expensive and I would have to sit there all evening feeling out of place.

“Oliver?” she called to me softly. “Dessert?”

She handed me a pen and notebook which was so thoughtful of her so I managed to crack a smile, the first I had in days.

“That’s what I wanted to see,” she murmured and squeezed my hand where it rested on the table. “Now tell me what you want for dessert.”

We didn’t get a menu because this place didn’t have one. All the food and drinks were listed on a blackboard behind the

counter but I couldn't just point them out to her so I wrote something simple like a chocolate sundae. Regardless of what she had planned, I was *not* going to let her pay for me again.

I'd actually borrowed money from Evan, one of the farm boys, and told him I would pay him back by doing his share of the chores for the entire week. That was going to burn me out for sure but it was better than being taken out by a high school girl and letting her pay for both of us.

I didn't even know why I agreed to the date. These past two weeks had been hell with so much work but I was finally being allowed to stay out until nine and didn't have anything else to look forward to. Paige wasn't bothering me anymore so I took a chance tonight, thinking that she wouldn't complain about me to Scott again but then, one could never know for sure with her.

I closed my eyes, not wanting to think about her. She'd tried to text me a few times after that day when she had joined Rhys and Devon in showing me my place but I had ignored her. I'd *avoided* her, in fact. It hurt but I told myself that I wanted nothing more to do with her and was not going to let her treat me like shit anymore.

I had given her so many chances, believed that she would change, that she might grow out of it even if she couldn't acknowledge our...involvement in public. I hadn't expected her to revert to her old ways as soon as other people came in the picture.

I was an idiot. They were right about that.

I handed the notebook back to Rayne, feeling a little depressed. I felt sorry for her because she had brought me here

to spend time with me and yet, my heart was not in it.

Life was lonely again without Paige creeping in the basement and stable or me creeping into her room. She didn't bully me anymore and it was the most fucked up thing that I actually *missed* being on her radar even if it was in a negative manner.

Shit, what was wrong with me? The girl was spoiled and evil.

I buried my fingers in my hair, rested my elbows on the table and let out a heavy sigh, staring into my glass of coke and watching the bubbles fizzing inside.

“Don't worry, Oliver. I'll have you home by nine and I won't touch you,” Rayne assured me with a little bit of humor in her voice.

I huffed out a little laugh and looked up to find her gaping at me. When I gave her a questioning look, she quickly busied herself with sipping her own coke.

“Umm. I've never heard you laugh before. I mean, I know you can't like...well, I know about your disabil- Um...your voice but...like...that was a laugh right there and I guess it surprised me.”

I grew sober then and stared out the window again.

“Sorry.” Her voice was small and apologetic. “I didn't mean to be rude.”

Reaching out a hand, I placed it over hers and squeezed, letting her know with my eyes that I knew what rude was and her words weren't it. She smiled at me briefly and I smiled back, grateful that I had at least one person on my side.

The thought came too soon because just then the door to the restaurant opened and in walked the very people I had been determined to avoid all week. Paige Hamilton's asshole boyfriend and his two friends, Devon and some other guy whom I had seen a few times before.

I tensed immediately and Rayne craned her neck to look at them before blowing out a breath and saying, "Shit."

Shit was right.

"We should get out of here," she muttered and frowned at me with concern. "I mean, I like you, Oliver and it's not a problem for me to be seen with you but I just don't want to get you in trouble with your dad."

For a moment, I had no idea whom she meant and stared at her in confusion until it dawned on me.

I let out a rough exhale, wanting to get out of here as well but my hesitation had cost me because Rhys and his cronies were surrounding us now, greeting Rayne and being usual jerks, pulling up chairs at our table. The noise, the jeering and extra energy got on my nerves and Rayne just gave me a helpless look before shooting a glare at Rhys.

Paige wasn't with them. Maybe she hadn't felt like sneaking out tonight and I was glad. I didn't want to have to deal with her on top of everything else.

"Well, what do you know?" Rhys drawled, looking at me sideways. "Everyone's slumming it these days. What is it about you, farm boy, that's got all the rich girls' panties in a twist?"

"Jesus, Rhys," Rayne grumbled in annoyance.

He only laughed in return. “What? I’m not wrong, am I? My words may cut but they’re the god-awful truth, honey. You’re only into this piece of shit because you’re horny,” he told her bluntly and I cringed at his words. “Same thing happened to Paige. At least he gave her something. You though...”

He trailed off with a shrug and my fingers tightened around the glass I was holding as Rayne put two and two together before gaping at me.

“That’s bullshit,” she breathed, but she was looking at me for confirmation.

I said nothing. I was so angry at Rhys for talking about Paige that way that nothing else registered for a minute.

“Order some more stuff, boys,” Rhys said loudly and whistled to the waitress. “Stable boy here is footing the bill tonight.”

He clamped a hand on my shoulder and I shook him off.

“Well, aren’t you?” he probed innocently and my face burned with embarrassment. “I mean if you can take her out on a date, you must be loaded. Rich girls don’t come cheap, boy. Although looking at this place, I’d say Rayne made an exception for your sorry ass.”

“Rhys Walton, shut the hell up,” Rayne gritted at him and regarded me with a pained grimace. “Oliver, let’s just get out of here.”

“Oh come on,” the rich boy next to me pouted. “We’re just getting started. Ollie here is paying for dinner tonight. Are you on a budget, mute boy? We’ll try and go easy on-”

He fell out of his chair before he could finish speaking and glared up at me while silence fell in the restaurant. Everyone was staring at us. Especially at me because I was on my feet and breathing hard after having just shoved Rhys away from me. The name 'Ollie' falling from his lips had triggered me. It still hurt. That reminder that I had lost my friend and he had died a horrible death because of me.

Rhys didn't get up. He didn't acknowledge it when someone came to ask him if he was okay, given his name and status. He was a Walton and that meant he could get away with murder if he chose to. Nobody was going to arrest him even if he ended up demolishing the entire restaurant. I had so much more to lose. I couldn't even afford to replace a broken glass in this place much less pay for any further damage resulting from a fight.

But I had had it with them. I was so fucking sick of this same shit. Especially since the thing with Paige had blown up in my face and taught me just how much I got kicked around for taking crap without retaliating.

I was about to ask Rayne to leave with me when Rhys got to his feet and faced me once more with a death stare on his face.

"Stable boy's got some fight in him after all," he said in a low voice, ignoring Rayne's placating words. "So fucking bold, aren't you, ever since I let you take a dip in my girlfriend's pus-?"

My fist flew into his face without hesitation, shutting off those words and he stumbled. Nobody was quiet this time. Rayne let out a gasp and said my name while Rhys' friends came at me with matching menacing expressions but he held

up a hand and stopped them, using his other hand to rub his jaw.

“You want to fight me, motherfucker?” he asked softly, his dark eyes glinting with the promise of retribution. “Let’s fight then. Rayne, go home,” he said to my date out of the corner of his mouth. “Barn boy and I are going to settle this out back.”

I didn’t listen to Rayne as she tried to hold me back and walked out just ahead of Rhys, knowing that I was not going to back down from this fight even if it killed me. He’d brought Paige in the middle of this, trying to humiliate her when she wasn’t even around to defend herself and I wasn’t going to sit back and tolerate that. I didn’t care what that made me anymore. All I knew was that I didn’t want to hear a single word against her from this bastard’s mouth.

We ended up in the alley behind the restaurant and Rhys took off his expensive jacket to place it on the dumpster before facing me. I clenched my fists and prepared for his attack as the cold mist swirled around us and the darkness in the empty alleyway loomed dangerously.

The blow was so sudden that it knocked the breath out of me. Not from Rhys. From behind me. Gasping and turning around to see who it was in the midst of my pain, I received another surprise as someone shoved me from the side, making me crash against the dumpster.

Again, it wasn’t Rhys. He was just casually leaning beside me, ankles crossed with those branded sneakers white against the night as he watched me with a cold expression while his friends, the two who had joined him earlier, came at me.

I shot Rhys a look that spoke volumes about his cowardice and sneakiness and he simply looked at his nails and drawled, “I don’t get my hands dirty with low lives like you, dumbass. I’m a fucking Walton. I only fight my equals. And you will never be that.”

I didn’t have time to digest his words when Devon punched me hard in the stomach and I doubled over, my eyes tearing up at the pain. I would have straightened and punched him back but the other guy who was with them rammed his elbows down on my spine with the force of his entire body behind him, making me crumble on to the cold, concrete ground, my knees making a slight cracking sound as they hit the bottom.

“Fuck, that was almost too easy,” I heard Rhys say as he laughed. “Fucker wanted to challenge me. You should’ve just bought me burgers, man and called it a day.”

I clutched my stomach and tried to catch my breath as pain ravaged through my body. Pain I wasn’t used to because I wasn’t really a fighter. I knew exhaustion, not brawls and injuries resulting from them. If it was only Rhys, I would’ve taken him down. But they had ambushed me, come at me from the back and doubled the number I was expecting.

I should have known a person like him would have no concept of honor. I choked out a breath and gasped again when a foot landed on my side, one final blow before they backed off.

The last thing I heard before I lost consciousness was Rhys’ taunting voice as he said, “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a girlfriend to go and fuck before the night is over. Sleep tight, farm boy.”



...

*“Oliver. Oliver, wake up. Hey.”*

*I peeled my eyes open to find a small, cheerful looking face in my line of vision. Raven.*

*“You gotta get cleaned up and dressed,” she told me, sounding a little excited. “Someone’s taking you home today.”*

*I was immediately alert upon hearing those words and rubbed my eyes, sitting up in bed before casting her a questioning glance.*

*She shrugged at me. “It’s true. He asked for you after he learned that...well...that you can’t talk,” she finished in a whisper and looked uncomfortable. “He’s from the next town. I’m so happy for you, Oliver.”*

*I felt nothing as she told me these things. I’d been in foster care for two years now after my parents’ deaths. The police hadn’t been able to tell if I had killed the man or not because the bottle had my mother’s fingerprints on it as well as mine, I guess.*

*They ruled it as homicide where the victims killed each other according to the reports I had read in the St. James Daily News article. I’d been questioned by the police but they were informed by my neighbors and teachers about my condition.*

*They'd given me a written questionnaire and I had simply sat there and stared at it.*

*After that I had gone for a psychological analysis, answering the questions with nods and shakes of my head. They said I was normal and just in a bit of shock. The police were also told that my household had been pretty chaotic.*

*They had handed me over to the foster care system so they could find someone to give me a proper home. Except that no one wanted to once they found out how old I was and my past history with witnessing violent deaths along with my disability. That's what it was now, right? It didn't matter if it wasn't for physical reasons. I couldn't speak so I was categorized as disabled.*

*The man who stood by the social worker's office gave me a grim smile as he studied me when I showed up ten minutes later.*

*"Hello, boy," he said calmly as he took me in. "I'm Scott Hamilton. I'm from Dreamhaven. That's where you'll be living now as well."*

*He tried to sound pleasant but even my twelve year old brain could tell that there was so much wrong with his statement. I was sure that Jonas, the social worker in charge of me, had told him my name but he still called me boy. And instead of asking me anything, he was telling me what he planned to do with me.*

*I simply nodded in response. I was used to the routine here but I really didn't want to stay in a foster care unit all throughout my teens. Deep down, I wished for a family that*

*could maybe be peaceful and accepting of my presence even if they couldn't truly love me. I'd be okay with that.*

*Raven was my only friend here but even she got tired of me when I wasn't able to respond to her chatting.*

*"I'm looking forward to getting to know you better," Scott told me and for some reason, he sounded robotic.*

*I watched him shake hands with Jonas and frowned slightly when he subtly slipped a hundred dollar bill into the social worker's hand before smirking and turning to me. He clamped a hand on my shoulder, pressing a little too hard.*

*"We live on a farm, by the way," he said to me, narrowing his eyes a little. "You'll be expected to pull your weight just like everyone else."*

...

I hadn't had a problem with his statement or expectation. I'd been looking forward to helping out. The funny thing was, I had thought by 'everyone else' he meant my new family, not the rest of the people who worked for him.

He hadn't taken a foster son home that day. He'd bought himself a slave.

~ ~ ~

## Chapter Twenty-Four

### Paige

I heard voices in the stable the next morning when I went to check why my best friend had gone straight to the barn after parking her car at the end of the driveway. It was a Saturday and the sun was barely up at around six a.m. Once again, I found myself obsessing and getting insanely jealous over Rayne's growing friendship with Oliver.

After that last time when I had foolishly joined my friends into making fun of him, just acting out of habit, he had completely frozen me out. I hadn't wanted to grovel after texting him several times and being ignored. He was still so insignificant and believed he could hold one small slip against me when I had regretted it the minute the words had left my mouth. I couldn't mess around with him anymore, yes but that didn't mean I was willing to stand by and watch him and Rayne become a couple or something.

The thought of him kissing her and doing things to her like he had done to me made my stomach turn. Oliver belonged to me. That's what my father had told me all those years ago. He was my property. No one else's.

Peeking around the barn door, I caught a glimpse of Rayne sitting on a stool in front of Oliver, facing him as she dabbed at his forehead with something. I blinked at the cuts and scrapes I could see on his body and held my breath as worry pushed through my initial jealousy and irritation.

“You can’t go to work like this,” she said to him, placing a hand on his arm, which was bare. He wasn’t even dressed properly, just wore those low hanging jeans and I widened my eyes at the dark bruise on his side, under his ribs.

Shit, what the fuck happened?

Oliver shook his head at Rayne and began to stand.

“Oliver, come on, look at you. You can’t even walk properly without wincing,” Rayne cried out and stood up angrily. “How are you going to do physical labor all day? Jesus, don’t you even get a sick day?”

His silence this time was not due to the fact that he couldn’t speak but because it was an answer to her question and I unexpectedly experienced a strong urge to go to him and take him in my arms.

“I can’t believe this. You can’t go to the hospital, you can’t go to the police and now you can’t even take a fucking day off. I hate this.” She hugged herself and began to cry softly. “I hate not being able to help you. No one deserves this sort of life, least of all you.”

I felt like crying as well when I heard the pain and frustration in her voice and flattened myself against the outer wall.

A minute later, Oliver passed me as he walked out of the stables, having changed and carrying a small backpack,

leading his horse behind him. He didn't see me and I stared after him, noticing how he was trying so hard not to limp as he walked away. My heart twinged with an ache that was becoming so familiar now every time I thought of him.

Rayne followed him out slowly and she was staring after him too, wiping away at her tears. Then she noticed me standing there and narrowed her eyes at me.

“What do you want, Paige?”

The hostility in her voice was something I had never heard before. Not even that last time when she had told me off regarding Oliver. But she really sounded like she hated me now.

“Rayne, what happened to him?” I asked softly, trying not to give away too much with my tone.

She scoffed and rolled her eyes. “You don't even deserve to know,” she muttered and started to leave.

I grabbed her arm to stop her. “Please, tell me,” I begged, letting go of my pride and giving her a helpless look. “He won't tell me, Rayne, please, I need to know.”

“*For god's sake, why, Paige?*” she yelled at me, tugging her arm away. “Why do you want to know? So you can torture him some more with the reminder? Your fucking boyfriend did this, okay!” she finally revealed. “Why can't you people just leave him alone? He never did anything to you or Rhys. We were just sitting there having dinner and Rhys showed up looking for a fight because he's got nothing better to do than to pick on those weaker than him.”

She shook her head at me in disgust. “I honestly am ashamed to call you my friends. This has gone too far and none of us ever speak up. Our fathers are so powerful, they think they can do whatever they want in this town and trample over those who can’t defend themselves. I am so fucking sick of trying to pretend that everything is fine.”

Rayne shot daggers at me with her eyes. “Everything is not fine, Paige. One day, your father is going to have to face consequences for the way he has been treating Oliver all these years. All this time, I kept quiet because of our friendship but some things are way more important now. And no, it’s not because he’s just some guy coming between us. This is about right and wrong.”

She stomped off after giving me that speech while I stayed glued to the barn door, her words circulating in my head. Only one sentence stood out more than anything in my heated mind though.

*You boyfriend did this.*

....

I burst into his room at the Walton manor an hour later, fully intending to go nuts on him but I paused in the doorway when I realized Rhys wasn’t alone. There was a girl...someone I knew but who didn’t school with us...Daria, I think her name was.

She was seated on his bed, laughing with him over something and I regarded both of them suspiciously.

“What is she doing here?” I wanted to know as soon as Rhys looked up and noticed me standing there.

His eyes were red and watery and I knew he’d been smoking something strong as he got to his feet, wearing nothing but his boxers, with an older girl in his room.

“Relax. She came for the weekend,” he told me nonchalantly while the girl stood up as well and gave me a look that was friendly.

I ignored her. “No. I mean, what is she doing here? In your room?”

He rolled his eyes at my tone. “We’re just talking, Paige. What, is that a big deal for us now? I mean, you fucked another guy,” he reminded me lazily.

Daria inched away from him and said, “Umm, I’m just gonna go now.”

She nodded at me and slipped out while Rhys and I looked at each other.

“Why did you beat him up?” I asked in a tight voice.

He let out a sigh and walked closer to me. “So you found out, huh? Not that I’m surprised. I mean, I couldn’t pay Rayne to keep her damn mouth shut obviously.”

I gaped at him then, not even sure why this shocked me. “You paid people to keep quiet about you beating up Oliver?”

He gave me a look that told me that should be obvious. “You know I can’t go around getting in trouble, right? Can’t have



my grandfather finding out about it.”

My lips tightened upon hearing his casual explanation while I remembered Oliver’s injuries from earlier.

“You didn’t answer my question, Rhys. Why did you hurt him?”

He was looking bored this whole time but my question made his eyes glimmer with interest.

“He was itching for a fight, Paige,” was his cool reply. “That’s what boys like. Deep down, we’re all animals.”

“He isn’t,” I replied in a low voice, looking up at him as he reached me.

Rhys placed one hand up on the wall beside my head and peered down at me. “I have a question for you, Paige Hamilton,” he said pleasantly. “If you’re so bothered by this, then what are you doing here? Why aren’t you there with him, tending to his wounds?”

I glared up at him, hating him so much in that moment while he laughed at me snarkily. “Let me tell you why,” he said loudly, pushing away from me. “It’s because you’re afraid. You don’t have it in you to stand up for him because that’s not how you were raised, baby.”

I watched him miserably while he walked off to pick something up from the nightstand and brought it to his lips.

“You don’t want to let him have control over you,” he continued as he took a hit from whatever he was smoking. “And I know this because you’re the same as me. We’re both bullies who get high on the power trip because we don’t like admitting we are weak. The only difference between you and

me is that you're trying to fit into the norm your parents created while I try to fight against it."

He turned back to me, his face barely visible behind the clouds of smoke that hung in the air.

"You can't do it, Paige," he stated again with conviction, not taking his eyes off me. "Sure, there's growing and learning and all that shit when we're teenagers but this is different. You aren't made to be kind to those below you. Stop. Trying."

...

*We were having lunch in our kitchen on a cold, rainy day. Mum had made delicious pot roast and hot chocolate for me after Dad had picked me up from a play date with Rayne. I was glad to be inside my home in a warm, fuzzy sweater and inhaling the yummy stuff on the table. Dad was laughing at something Mum said while I chewed on a mouthful of chicken and glanced out the window.*

*I paused when I saw the boy outside.*

*He was wearing nothing but some ragged jeans and a vest, getting drenched in the pouring rain and my heart went out to him.*

*He didn't live with us. Dad said it was because he needed to learn how to be a proper servant but when he had first brought*

*him home a week ago, I thought I was going to have a brother.*

*“Can we call him in, Daddy?” I asked, turning to my father worriedly. “It’s so cold outside. He must be hungry too.”*

*Mum stopped eating to glare at me but my dad just smiled patiently.*

*“We can’t do that, sweetheart,” he told me firmly. “Servants aren’t allowed to eat with us.”*

*“But-”*

*“Paige,” he said firmly and put down his fork. “I’ve told you this before. We don’t associate with them. They’re only here to work so that Daddy’s farm can flourish and my little girl can finally go to Walton Prep like the rest of the rich folk.”*

*My brow furrowed at his response and my eyes went back outside to the boy. He was trying to get one of the horses inside, walking around the paddock, looking so sad and tired. Dad called him the ugliest dog ever but he wasn’t a dog. And his face was pretty like a girl’s. That’s what Rayne said to me the other day.*

*“You understand what I’m saying don’t you, honey?” my father asked me but I remained silent.*

*I didn’t understand but it seemed important to him that I did. That I keep myself apart from the stable boy and others. That I held myself on some higher level like the rest of the rich folks in Dreamhaven and Cedarfield. So many times he had told me that and yet, I wasn’t sure why we couldn’t just be kind.*

*“You are a Hamilton.” Suddenly my father’s voice was angry and I saw Mum get up from the table and excuse herself while my dad pinned me with a hard stare. “Do you have any idea*

*what I have sacrificed to set myself, this family, on the path of success? I had to borrow money from Patrick Walton and swallow my pride for you, Paige. Your father had to grovel and he made me grovel because that's what people do when they have power. Do you like that? Do you like knowing that a man made your father beg him for something?"*

*I shook my head, feeling sorry for him and also a little angry. I didn't like this Patrick Walton. Not one bit.*

*My father nodded gravely. "We are the ones who will hold the power one day, not just those Waltons. We will be right up there with them, Paige and no one will ever look down at you or your family again." His eyes bore into me as he spoke and his words seemed to fill the air around me, drowning out the rain for a minute and making the boy disappear.*

*"You're going to inherit all of this one day. This is your legacy because you are my only child. We don't build legacies by feeling sorry for those beneath us. That'll be your weakness and we can't be weak, Paige or else they will take advantage of you. Do you get what I'm trying to tell you?"*

*I nodded then. I was starting to get it. I knew he expected me to so I was going to try.*

*"Good." He smiled in satisfaction. "Never hesitate to exercise your power. You don't look at dogs and ask them to come inside and feed them. You make sure they know their place. You be the boss. Yes?"*

*I smiled absently at him and nodded again even as my eyes drifted towards the window one last time, uneasy and searching. He wasn't there anymore.*

*“Don’t worry, sweetheart,” my father spoke again, picking his fork back up. “You’re still young. We’ll go over this a few more times in the future just to be sure you have learned how I do things around here. I know you’ll make me proud, Paige.”*



## Chapter Twenty-Five

### Paige

I liked the pinkish glow in the horizon. It happened almost every time the sun set along the riverside. I could only see his silhouette as I approached him, knowing where to find him because he seemed to prefer ending his days watching the sunset.

I was sure my horse alerted him to my presence but he didn't turn around to look at me. I didn't know why my heart felt like it was breaking as I studied him, his hair tousled by the wind and his hoodie clinging to his body. The body which must be harboring so much pain and exhaustion at the moment after the beating from last night and a full day of work.

Jesus, he was only seventeen, just like me. What the hell were we doing to him? To his life. And why, why was Oliver letting us do it? Most guys his age would have run away a long time ago.

There were apple trees in this corner of the farm. I kind of understood why this was his spot. It was private and hidden, peaceful and beautiful. I didn't think anyone came out here that much. Why would they? At the end of the day, they all had homes to go to.

“Hey,” I said, putting my hands in the pockets of my jeans and squinting at the sunset. The strong breeze whipped my hair around and made me shiver a little even though I was wearing my own hoodie.

He probably hated me all over again. I mean, he had every right to. I couldn't be trusted. I didn't even trust myself to not hurt him again. This wasn't even about redemption or forgiveness anymore. I didn't deserve any of it. And he shouldn't give it to me knowing just what it could cost him in future. I was his bully. His tormentor. His enemy. One small speech, one single realization and one blow to my convictions was not going to make me a better person all of a sudden. There was too much of my father in me.

I stood there and told myself not to cry, to simply say what I came here to say, what he needed to hear from me.

“You need to run away, Oliver.” Wind greeted my words and he remained still beside me but I dragged in a deep breath and continued. “You can't keep living this way. I don't know how to help you. My father is too strong and I don't know how to stand up to him. I don't even know if I have any right to after the way I've treated you.”

Sucking on my bottom lip and blinking hard, I kept the tears at bay because I didn't want him to know how hard it was for me to speak these words. To send him away. But it was for the best. He could never find happiness here. He hadn't broken yet, not completely but it might happen any day now and then, I would truly hate myself for it.

“I'll give you some money. You can find another job somewhere else. Just...just make a new life for yourself where



you don't have to put up with this kind of existence. You'll be fine. I know you will be. And you have to go tonight. The mayor, the cops, the social workers, damn it, they're all in cahoots with my father. It's so fucked up and I've been a part of this too long. It's corrupted me too, Oliver. I'm not making excuses. I'm just saying... I wish...I wish I could be better for you but I can't. You have to leave. Find a real home, go somewhere where no one will hurt you like this.”

I looked up quickly when he shifted to stand in front of me. The bruises on his face made my lips tremble and I knew I would lose the fight with my tears soon. We did this to him. It wasn't just Rhys. It was all of us.

Slowly, his hands came up to my face and his thumbs brushed away the tears that finally began to slide down my cheeks. His eyes stayed on mine for so long while the sun created a light halo around him.

Just once he shook his head at me and then mouthed the word, ‘No.’

I wanted to yell at him then, chase him away using any means necessary, be the bully that I was at heart, just like Rhys had said. Just like my father had conditioned me to be.

“Why wouldn't you listen?” I asked him helplessly, knocking his hands away. “Why would you want to stay after everything, Oliver? Why? Why did you never try to run?”

His gaze dropped for a second before coming up to meet mine and he gave me the saddest look ever, a look of longing and desire mixed with something that could never be. I sniffled at the emotion he was trying to convey because it was

just so stupid and unbelievable. I'd treated him like shit. I didn't deserve his heart.

"I can't be what you want me to be," I told him as I cried softly. "You won't like me if we get together, don't you see that? I'm mean. I'm the bad guy, Oliver. I can't protect your feelings."

He kept on looking at me like that, like he wasn't even hearing my words. Like he didn't care, which was insane. He knew what I could do to him. He knew me.

"Please," I whispered and buried my face in my hands. "I've only been taught to hate. I don't know love. I don't know how to treat you like you're precious. The way Rayne does."

I felt his arms go around me then and cried into his chest, his hoodie absorbing my tears and sounds. I breathed him in hungrily even though I knew I shouldn't. I was supposed to let him go, send him away from me. But I was also selfish. That was my nature.

And that one embrace from him was enough to make me take from him. To make me weak. I hated that but I couldn't help myself.

My arms went around him abruptly and he tensed, letting out a tiny hiss. I glanced up worriedly.

"I'm sorry. Does it hurt a lot?"

He swallowed and smiled at me a little, playing it off like it was nothing because that was who he was.

Taking his face gently between my hands, I reached up and kissed him. I shouldn't but I wanted to. I wanted to taste his

kisses again and have him hold me like there was nothing else in this world for him. Like I *was* his entire fucking world.

I smiled when his arms tightened around me, our bodies now pressing together. It felt good. It felt right even if it wasn't and should never be.

“I’m afraid of being taken advantage of,” I confessed and drew back to give him an intense look. “Oliver, I’m not strong like you, you know. I don’t have your patience or your tolerance level. I can’t even handle seeing you talking to Rayne, do you know that? When you’re with me, I want to keep you all to myself but I’m so scared that you’ll find her more worthy than me.” I bowed my head and winced at that statement. “Because she is. She really is. I feel like it’s only a matter of time when I will start to disgust you and she’ll seem like the better option.”

When I met his eyes again with a worried look on my face, I found him regarding me solemnly and nodding a little before mouthing, ‘She is the better option.’

I glared at him instinctively when he said that and shoved him away which caused him to grimace in pain.

“Shit, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.” Quickly, I reached for him to rub his arm and give him a regretful look. “See? This is what I mean about not being able to keep myself from hurting you. I’m so bad.”

With a focused expression, Oliver walked into me until he was almost on top of me and I had to back away to make space. But he kept doing it and I kept stepping backwards, looking at him in confusion until my back hit a tree trunk and I stopped. Oliver drew closer and put his hands on my waist,

bending his mouth to my neck to give me a soft kiss there. Then he lifted his head and peered at me with an almost mischievous sparkle in his eyes before his lips formed the next words.

‘Show me.’

I frowned at him quizzically because I needed some clarification. His lips curved just slightly as he took my hands and slowly slid them under his hoodie to trace his abs.

‘Show me. How bad you are.’

This time my mouth fell open a little at his words and I felt myself flush, heat spreading lazily throughout my body at his suggestion. I had come here to make things right and the guy was trying to get in my pants in the apple orchard against a tree for god’s sake. Well, Rhys was right about one thing, I guess. They were all animals deep down.

For some reason, it made me smirk to think of Oliver, who had gone without so much in life, as a horny teenager just wanting to have sex. A quickie against a tree with a girl he liked.

Me.

He liked *me*, not my friend.

I had to put his words regarding her being the better option out of my mind. He was teasing me, trying to get a reaction out of me which was dangerous. I had to teach him that. In my case, it was better if he didn’t try to push my buttons because-

My train of thought came to a halt when Oliver, apparently getting tired of waiting for me, leaned in to kiss me

possessively, drawing my body into his and letting me feel how hard he was already.

I moaned into his mouth, my arms slipping around his neck and my tongue warm and wet against his as we dove into our campaign to christen the orchard that evening. It was so naughty and exciting.

I was going to protect him as much as I could from now on. I may not be able to do much but I was going to try. Things couldn't go on like this. Oliver deserved so much more. And he was mine now. He was my stable boy. Not someone to push around and ill treat. But someone to treasure and give all the love he had been missing out on all these years.

“You'll teach me, right? You'll teach me how to love?” I whispered into his mouth, not really expecting an answer, gasping and trying to unzip him as my pussy became wet and began to need him.

He had a tortured expression on his face and this time, it was all about desire and I enjoyed seeing that so much as he helped me unzip his jeans and then pushed mine down my legs abruptly, making me step out of them.

Cool air brushed over my skin but his warmth balanced out the chill as he went to his knees and put his mouth between my legs.

“Oh, fuck,” I hissed and played with his hair as he did that, putting one thigh on his shoulder and then hastily remembering his injuries.

But he held on to it before I could lower my leg again and pinned me there while eating me out. His tongue licked and

swirled and I closed my eyes, loving the fact that he was doing this to me out in the wild like this. Loving him.

God, did I? Did I even know how to love? Was this ache in my heart which I had been feeling for weeks something to do with love? I didn't even know. But I did know that I wanted to be with him. If he would keep me, I would try to be good for him.

“Please, baby,” I said to him, begging him for my satisfaction and this time, I meant it. I meant the words with all my heart.

There was no more Rhys and me. It was always supposed to be Paige and Oliver.

He rose to his feet in one swift motion and breathed against my mouth urgently, making me taste myself. I didn't know if he did that on purpose or it was just instinct and I didn't have time to dwell on it before he was plunging in me, bare and hard like I had taught him.

I clutched at him as he made love to me, hugging him to myself and placing kisses on his neck, his earlobe, his jaw while crying out with his thrusts.

“You really are mine, aren't you, baby?” I questioned in awe and drew back to look into his lust-glazed eyes.

He managed to give me a smile even then and flicked his eyebrows at me once in the sexiest look I had ever seen on a guy and it pushed me over the edge in a way I didn't expect.

“God, yes,” I said throatily, letting him go deeper and deeper in me. “Come inside me, Oliver,” I told him.

His eyes met mine, passionate and dark and he bit on his lip before letting go.

It was so fucking perfect, I almost cried again. The way he looked at me was everything. His world began and ended with me and I didn't even know what to do with that knowledge but I settled for kissing him as he climaxed and trembled against my body. I knew I could always count on him for one thing. No matter what went wrong, no matter how bad he was feeling, Oliver would never hurt me.







## Chapter Twenty-Six

### Paige

Days turned into weeks of sneaking around and I found myself experiencing something I had never experienced before. I fell in love. I fell in love with the stable boy. The boy I had spent so much of my teen years torturing and belittling. And he fell in love with me too and it was the most beautiful and incredible feeling in the world.

We were completely caught up in each other and it was hard during the days when I had school and Oliver had to stay on the farm. We had to be careful. If anyone found out about his involvement with me, he would be the one to suffer my father's wrath. And he'd already suffered enough.

It was torture having to wait for nightfall when he could sneak into my room. Or the weekends when I could slip away to the orchard by the riverside and grab a few minutes of make-out sessions or a quick lunch. And then there were those late-night texts which he said he didn't mind even though he was tired because he just seemed happy to be with me.

It was crazy but then that's just what we were. Two teenagers crazy in love and nothing else mattered to us. The worst part was having to hide it when all I wanted to do was show him off to the world because no one could love like Oliver. No one had his heart and his soul. His purity and passion.

I lay in my bed one Friday evening playing with his hair and whispering stuff about school and my friends while he watched a movie on his phone. On mute. He liked the subtitles; he was so used to silence at nights that unwelcome sounds got on his nerves.

But my voice was always welcome. His eyes were hooded, shirt off with one knee propped up and I could see his whole body in the moonlight that filtered in through the curtains. It was around eleven and we kept the noises to a minimum. Rayne and I had called a truce like best friends do and she wanted to go watch a movie tonight but I had made excuses and stayed home. Every minute with Oliver was precious and so rare.

I still hadn't told my best friend that we were together because that insane jealousy inside me never really went away. I just hated the idea of losing him to her. I knew Rayne wouldn't try anything like that but Oliver would make any girl lose her mind. Even stuck-up, mean girls like me.

I'd washed his hair again tonight. It got greasy with the constant wind and dirt and I loved how soft and longish it was. He enjoyed letting me do it and I couldn't stop giggling because he got hard every time in the shower. Since he wasn't too overt and stuff when it came to sex, he tried to hide it. But I found it adorable and teased him endlessly until his eyes grew dark and full of yearning and he gave into the desire.

It was straight out of some romance novel, the stuff our relationship was all about now. I never thought I'd be so corny when it came to a guy.

“You’re so hot,” I whispered to him for like the dozenth time that week and he smirked a little. Not arrogantly but in a cute way that told me he liked it when I told him such things.

I rubbed one of my legs over his, dressed in nothing but my panties and a t-shirt while he still wore his jeans. I had to remember to buy him sweatpants this weekend. He would look even sexier in those.

And now I was getting horny but I didn’t want to have sex straight away. He got sleepy after that and I started to miss him. Yeah it sounded desperate but I liked his company and just watching him and telling him stuff. He worked so hard all day and made time for me even though I knew all he wanted to do was eat and sleep. The same thing he’d been doing for years.

A feeling of protectiveness overcame me as I studied his profile, those beautiful lips and heartbreaking features. It was always a risk, such a huge risk. And knowing that despite his fear of my father and Simon, he was doing this for me, for our relationship...that meant a lot.

“Oliver,” I murmured and kissed his cheek, nuzzling my nose against his skin. “I don’t want you to get beaten up, you know. It’s the first thing they would do and I won’t be able to stop them,” I sniffed. “I hate putting you in this position but it’s really hard to stay away.”

He didn’t look at me but his fingers moved on the phone screen and he typed something on the text message window before showing it to me.

**I can take a few beatings, Paige.**

I made a face at him. “I know. You’re super strong and stuff. Tough body and all those muscles, years of hard labor. I get it. But that doesn’t mean I want us to get caught.”

I frowned at him worriedly as I spoke. Was it weird to talk about the future right now? We were so young and nothing was a given but I knew I wanted to be with him and he wanted to be with me too so I blurted out, “You can come with me when I go to college.”

Oliver gave me startled look at that but the more I thought of it, the greater that idea sounded.

“I mean, you’ll be eighteen too, you don’t have to stay here. Nobody has to know where you’ll go. We’ll figure something out, get you a job in the city maybe. There’s no way I’m leaving you behind.”

His eyes glinted in the moonlight and he smiled at me sweetly before bringing his hand up to caress my cheek. I bent my head to kiss him then and when we pulled part, he typed something else on his phone.

**So you still want me to be your bitch even when we aren’t in Dreamhaven?**

I rolled my eyes and smacked him on the arm.

“Idiot, not bitch. My boyfriend,” I said happily and snuggled with him. “Just a few more months. Maybe I’ll ask Dad to get me an apartment instead of staying in a dorm and you could live with me. Secretly, of course.”

My heart began to speed up at the possibilities. Oliver and I living together in the city. He would go to work while I’d be in my classes. And we won’t have to sneak around. We could

order takeout at the end of the day and cuddle on my couch with a movie. I'd take him to my college parties but only if he wanted to go. He'd be free and happy there.

I was so busy dreaming that I didn't realize he was holding his phone in front of my face again so I could read the text.

**I don't like the idea of us living in sin.**

My mouth fell open a little and I frowned at him, feeling kind of hurt. Didn't he want that? Didn't he want us to have that life and be happy together?

**Why not?** I typed back on his screen because I didn't want to speak to him in anger. I had a tendency to be rude and hurt his feelings and I had made up my mind not to do that anymore.

**I want to know you're committed to me first.**

My frown deepened.

**You think I'm not committed to you?** I typed faster because I was getting upset.

**Not yet.**

I shot him a sour look then and exhaled. "What do you want from me then? How else am I supposed to show my commitment?"

I waited a while to read his reply because I was getting so pissed off. He looked deep into my eyes and waited for me to read it too. And when I turned my face towards the screen, I stopped breathing.

**Promise you will marry me and nobody else.**

“Oliver,” I breathed out, feeling my heart well up with some emotion I couldn’t sort out. All I knew was that it made me want to cry and smile at the same time. Wait, did he actually propose to me?

Placing the phone away, he turned on his side so that he was leaning over me and placed kisses on my face and neck before drawing back and studying my expression.

I returned his look, knowing it was insane but also wishing he meant it. That he really did want to be with me forever.

“Do you really mean that?” I asked in a whisper when I couldn’t hold it in any longer.

He was quiet before he looked away from me, squinting at my nightstand and then pointing to something.

Great. He was doing the pointing thing again and it was adorable as fuck every time. When he wanted something that was out of his reach or wanted permission to take something, he would just point at it and wait for someone to hand it to him. Someone being mainly me.

When I glanced over at the nightstand, all I saw was pieces of the wire I had used for my science project earlier; a stretchy binding wire which also acted as a fastening.

With a puzzled look, I reached out and held up one of the pieces to which he nodded and curled his fingers. Once I handed it to him, Oliver took my hand and began twining the wire loosely around my ring finger.

Jesus, this shit was corny as hell and yet, I wanted to melt right here into this mattress. Why, why was he so romantic and

cute and devoted? This was like some movie scene and I couldn't stop blushing.

When he was done, I raised my hand and stared at the wire around my finger like it was the most expensive and glamorous diamond ring in the entire world and I swallowed, my eyes filling up with tears. Fuck, this was ridiculous.

“But we're too young, Oliver,” I whispered, even though I was already seeing visions of him in a suit looking all handsome and sexy and me in a wedding dress, being crazy and impulsive. Hell, I would marry him tomorrow if we could run away. But I had to stay in my dad's good books. I needed his money for college.

His lips met my knuckles and stayed there in one of those romantic gestures while he nodded at me like he understood.

‘Not now,’ he mouthed.

I shifted my head on the pillow and asked him when. His eyes got that playful look in them and he took my finger and traced it all the way from his collarbone to his belly button, making me smirk.

“Wayyy down the line?” I guessed and Oliver dragged his teeth over his bottom lip while grinning and nodded.

God, I loved this guy something fierce now. I was even starting to understand his own brand of sign language. It was uniquely Oliver and I loved that he chose to communicate with me that way.

“Come here,” I said, grabbing his face and placing a hot kiss on his mouth. “Now you've given me ideas.”

I wrapped my legs around his hips and grinded into him, losing myself in the kiss. God, his mouth. His tongue. His whole fucking body. Like just kill me now.

His hands roamed freely, caressing my breasts and my tummy under my t-shirt before moving to my ass, squeezing them while his tongue played around with mine, his kisses growing fiercer and more intense.

I loved him. I loved him so much.

The guy had just proposed to me, for God's sake and I didn't even know what to do with myself. I knew he wasn't the sort to take these things lightly. If he said he wanted to be my husband one day, I knew he meant it. Despite everything, he was choosing me.

We froze when there was a loud knock on my door and my father's voice came through. Oliver reacted so fast by rolling off me that he almost fell off the bed and it was all I could do to keep myself from bursting into laughter. The door was locked so there was nothing to worry about and anyway, Dad would never just walk into my room without permission.

"Relax," I whispered to him and pointed to the bathroom where he could go hide.

"Just a minute, dad," I called out and pulled on my jeans, glancing at the bed to check that there was nothing on there to indicate that I had a boy in my room who was not supposed to be here.

Hurriedly, I opened the door and peeked out with a nonchalant smile. "Yes, Daddy? Is everything okay?"



He gave me a small frown and muttered, “Are you talking on the phone? I thought you’d be asleep?”

My heart sped up its beats and I tried hard not to let anything show on my face. “Yeah...um...sorry if I disturbed you. Rayne called and wanted me to make plans for tomorrow.”

He narrowed his eyes at me and after a few seconds, nodded. “You know how I am about school nights, Paige. It’s pretty late.”

I nodded back at him, looking apologetic. “I’m off to bed now. Good night, Daddy.”

He rubbed his jaw and looked away. “You didn’t disturb me, by the way. Simon just called and said there’s an emergency at the south side and I was going to send the boy to go and check what’s up. Happened to hear your voice. Good night.”

The blood rushed from my face then and I flicked a glance towards the bathroom, feeling very scared all of a sudden. Oh, shit.

“Wait,” I called out when my father turned to go downstairs, not knowing what the hell to say to stop him from going to the basement because Oliver was definitely *not* there. “Umm... I actually just saw him outside!”

What in the hell did I just say?

My dad stared at me like I had gone mad. “That’s not possible, Paige. He’s supposed to be down in the basement.”

“Yeah but I’m pretty sure I saw him,” I continued in a panic. “I was talking to Rayne and he was standing just outside when I glanced out the window. I was gonna tell you.”

Dad immediately stalked off and I watched while holding my breath as he went down the stairs and then turned towards the living room. I ran over to the bathroom before gesturing for Oliver to go.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered frantically as I pushed him out. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know what else to say. I wasn’t really thinking.”

In the middle of it all, he grabbed my face and kissed me, lingering longer than he should while my heart feared for him.

“Oliver, please, you need to go,” I hissed at him. “I’ll fix it. Go.”

When he finally disappeared down the stairs, which thankfully was not in plain view of the front door, I hurried over to the living room and found my father standing at the door, peering out into the night with a scowl on his face.

“There’s no one here, Paige,” he said quietly and I gulped.

“Maybe I was mistaken,” I said quickly and stayed frozen as he turned to study me with suspicion.

“I think you should go to sleep now,” he told me dryly. “There’s a vast difference between being ‘pretty sure’ and being ‘mistaken’.”

Then he shook his head and turned back, huffing out a laugh. “As if he would dare cross me. He doesn’t have it in him and he knows what he was trained for.”

Yeah. To obey him. Like a dog. I gritted my teeth at his implication as I followed him, aware that I was guilty of the same sins but at least I was trying to be better. No thanks to my father.

I was right on his heels when he reached the basement and swung the door open, going down a few steps. We saw Oliver lying down on the couch reading a dog-eared, old novel by the candlelight.

“Why aren’t you asleep, boy?” my father asked him and Oliver just got up slowly to regard him warily.

My heart went out to him, seeing how much he really was afraid of the man who had raised me and neglected to raise him.

Dad let out an impatient breath. “I don’t know why I still bother to ask you questions knowing you can’t fucking answer. Follow me.”

He turned and gave me a surprised frown when he saw me on the steps. “What’re you doing here? Go back upstairs,” he barked and I nodded quickly, unable to help myself from glancing at Oliver one last time before leaving.

Upstairs in my room, I leaned against the closed door and placed a hand over my chest, trying to breathe slowly. That was so close. He could have gotten in so much trouble. Everything would have been over in just a matter of minutes.

I blinked back the tears that started to form and went to sit on the bed, staring into space. I couldn’t lose him. Fuck, I couldn’t. He meant too much to me. We had to be more careful from now on.





## Chapter Twenty-Seven

### Paige

I was miserable in school the next day and in a generally grumpy mood. I couldn't focus on any of my classes because I was too busy worrying about Oliver and wondering what in the world he had been doing all night. Did he even get any sleep at all? He'd obviously left again before I woke up this morning because I hadn't seen him. It troubled me and we couldn't even text because he'd left his phone in my room.

Twice, I got called out in class by Mr. Ellis to give an answer and both times, I had been daydreaming about my boyfriend. It just went to show how infatuated I was because Mr. Ellis was hot and I'd always found it hard to concentrate on anything else but him whenever he was taking a class. Not that he cared much. All the girls crushed on him half the time anyway. And a few of the guys too.

During lunch time, I picked at my food with my chin braced on one hand and barely heard Rayne, Devon and Rhys talking about whatever it was they were talking about. Yeah, Rhys was still hanging out with us even though I hadn't totally forgiven him for what he did to Oliver. But I didn't hold it against him either because that would make me a hypocrite.

Rayne had eventually forgiven the guys as well when she noticed that there was no more bullying going on.

“How about it, Paige?” Rhys’ hand slipped on to my thigh out of habit. “You want to go to the movies with us tonight?”

I knocked his hand away but he only placed it back and squeezed even though he wasn’t even looking at me but drinking his coke.

“Rhys, I swear, if you don’t stop touching me, I will stab your hand with this fork,” I warned him and placed my fork on top of his hand for added measure.

He lowered the can of coke and raised an eyebrow at me before glancing down and slowly, carefully, removing his hand.

When Rayne and Devon started discussing their plans for later, Rhys leaned close to me so that his lips were near my ear and whispered, “You’re so whipped, baby.”

I shot him a glare and he laughed, shaking his head at me. “Farm boy must be quite good,” he teased in a low voice so only I could hear him. “Not that I’m surprised. I did get to see a demo that night.”

“God, Rhys, just stop talking,” I muttered, checking to see if Rayne could hear us but she was laughing at something Devon said and not even looking our way. “And don’t call him farm boy,” I snapped, picking up my fruit juice.

He grew quiet then and when I peeked at him, he had a serious look on his face and even though his eyes appeared sunken with dark circles, he was still easily the hottest guy in school.

Although, Oliver would have given him some serious competition if he had gone here. Suddenly, I missed him like hell and wished I could go home after pleading a killer headache or something. I just had to see him.

“Guess it’s really over now, huh?” Rhys asked me soberly and I glanced at him sideways.

He sounded sad which was stupid because we both knew he didn’t really care about me that way. We’d been more friends with benefits than anything else. There was nothing sad about our break up.

“Yup,” I said flippantly and tossed back my hair to which he pursed his lips.

“Cool. Well, I hope we can still be friends,” he said casually, putting his can of coke down. “I gotta go. See you around, Paige. Say hi to farm boy for me.”

I rolled my eyes as he got up and walked away, leaving his uneaten lunch on the table.

...

The coolest news awaited me when I got home that afternoon. Mum and Dad had gone to Cedarfield and I was going to be spending the evening alone because they would be late coming back from dinner. Hell, yes.

Quickly, I changed and packed some things before going over to the stable and getting my horse. In two minutes, I had reached the apple orchard and was settling against my

favourite tree with a blanket and my homework, waiting for Oliver. I knew he would come here as usual before returning to the barn and even though we would spend the whole evening together later, I still didn't want to miss a minute of his company.

Oliver didn't show up though and I grew more and more anxious as the sunset approached and he was nowhere to be seen. Feeling uneasy, I mounted my horse again and headed back to the barn, wondering where he was until I entered the stables and found him there, cleaning out the stalls.

“Oliver,” I said and he looked up with a startled frown, as jumpy as any new horse on the farm. “Sorry, didn't mean to spook you but I waited for you at the orchard. Why didn't you come?”

He let out a heavy sigh and rubbed his hands over his face. It was obvious he was super exhausted and probably just wanted to fill his tummy and hit the bed. I tried to hold back my smile when I saw he had rubbed dirt over his face with that gesture and threw my backpack down to fish inside for the gift I had bought him, forgetting all about my two hour wait and being upset now that he was finally standing in front of me, safe and sound.

“Look. I have something for you,” I said cheerfully and held up the grey sweatpants which was just his size. I knew. I'd checked the label on his jeans and I also was very familiar with his body.

Going over to him, I held it to his hips and smiled because damn, that already looked so good. I don't know what I would do if he actually put them on.



Oliver snorted in amusement for some reason as I held the pants there and imagined him in it and I stopped smiling to gape at him, stunned by that sound. He sounded like he meant to laugh but it came out as a light snort and his eyes were twinkling with amusement.

“Did you just try to laugh or something?” I asked in confusion. “I’m sorry. It’s just...strange. Not that I don’t like it. I mean, I’m glad I...I could make you laugh.”

I was blabbering but it was just so puzzling because I thought being mute meant he couldn’t do those things. It also made me curious as hell but I stamped down on it when he sobered up and his gaze turned slightly guarded.

“You wanna try them on for me?” I asked cheekily, dismissing the whole awkward moment and wiggling my eyebrows.

He held up his hands to show me how dirty they were and the pervert in me started to get turned on.

I stashed the pants back in my bag and went over to him, locking my hands behind his neck and murmuring, “Maybe you can try them on later. After we’re done playing?” I suggested seductively and cocked my head at him. “Make me dirty like you,” I said and it was all it took to make him crush his lips to mine and walk me back into one of the empty stalls while we ignored the animals around us.

God, after the miserable day I had had, it felt so good to be in his arms again, breathing him in, kissing him.

“I missed you,” I admitted tugging his hair back with my hands and sucking on his earlobe.

Pressing my tits against his bare chest, I wished I could make my clothes disappear with a blink. Oliver held me back by the shoulders and looked down at me intensely, his handsome face alight with affection and his gaze hooded as we shared a look.

‘Missed you more,’ he mouthed and I watched his lips, then his eyes and groaned because Rhys was so fucking right and I was *so* whipped. This guy could be sexy as hell and he didn’t even have to try.

That right there felt like a come-on even though they were three simple, clean words.

I launched myself at him again and this time, he picked me up and carried me over to the far corner. I knew I was about to get railed so bad by my stable boy and I was not at all ashamed.

“Mum and Dad are out,” I whispered to him as he laid me down on a haystack and settled his weight over me, kissing my neck and gripping my wrists to hold my arms above my head.

I writhed and moved against him in frustration but he calmly continued to kiss me, moving his lips and tongue from my collarbone to the tops of my breasts over my t-shirt.

He may not be experienced but he wasn’t impatient with me all the time either. And he never deliberately tried to do anything which would turn me on. It was all instinct, just him enjoying the feeling of being close to me, naked and aroused. And so in love.

“Do you know what that means, baby?” I questioned with a moan. “It means I can spend the whole evening with you and not go back till eight or nine. It means we can have amazing

sex over and over again. It means we get to be two lovesick, rebellious teenagers and not worry about the rest of the world.”

He raised himself slightly and pulled up my top so that he could unhook my bra and bare me to his gaze. Okay, wow. Was he even listening to me at all? He hadn't turned on the lights in this part of the stables and it felt so thrilling and intoxicating, stealing this time with him, witnessing his naughty side.

“I love you,” I whispered while he kissed my lips, my jaw and my neck. Then moved in for the kill by closing his mouth around one of my tits.

I cried out softly and this time, he did not try to silence me. I tangled my fingers in his hair, which was greasy again and I didn't even care.

“Make me dirty, baby,” I said again and closed my eyes, opening my legs up for him so he could get into his favorite position. “I love you so much.”

My heart was bursting with emotions, my voice laced with lust and love both. I wished I could stay here with him all night. Just one whole night with him where we could lose ourselves in each other and be silly. Why did he have to be the one guy I was not allowed to be with?

Slowly, he tugged off my jeans and knelt before me, studying me for a while. It was how every girl wanted to be looked at by the boy she loves. With complete adoration.

Oliver unbuttoned his own jeans and his erection popped up, making me spread my legs wider in anticipation. I sometimes

read books about guys who knew exactly what to do and I got turned on by those scenes. They knew all the ways to talk dirty in the bedroom, they had all the moves and could melt panties with a look but they were all fiction and I didn't want them.

I wanted this guy. Artless and honest. Just himself. My diamond in the rough.

I knew why he wasn't getting completely naked. In the back of his mind was that same fear that we would be discovered and he didn't want to be caught in a vulnerable state. For the first time ever, I understood that and absorbed his weaknesses into my soul.

To have no voice and then to have no covering and be put on the spot, humiliated, abused, pushed around. That would be the worst situation ever. I'd done that to him once. Ran away with his clothes when he'd been bathing in the river. Taken his dignity along with it.

I teared up at the memory and I turned my face away, suddenly not able to let it go. The guilt pressing down on me. The fear that I was still that same girl and he wasn't truly safe from me. I felt like an imposter.

His movements halted while I stayed still as well and the most bittersweet thing of all was that Oliver stopped trying to fuck me and came down to lie beside me, his brow creased and eyes full of concern.

"What's wrong?" he mouthed and I sniffed and shook my head.

He wouldn't understand if I told him. He didn't treat people the way I had treated him. He didn't have a mean bone in his

body. His thumbs came up to wipe my tears like he always does and I forced out a laugh.

“Yesterday my father cock-blocked us and today, it’s me being an emotional mess. I’m sorry.”

His lips curved slightly and his eyes softened before he cradled my head in his chest. So gentle and accepting. So Oliver. It made me want to cry harder.

Soft rain began to fall outside, unexpected but also very welcome.

“This is nuts.” I wiped away my tears and sat up abruptly, pulling my clothes back on. “You haven’t even eaten after working all afternoon. Let’s just go home and I’ll make you burgers again and give you a massage. Then we can watch a movie and have sex. Come on. We have like about three hours to ourselves before my parents get home.”

He’d zipped himself up again and waited for me to gather my things before I checked to see that no one was outside the barn, which wasn’t really necessary. All the workers had gone home or to the quarters. No one bore more workload than Oliver anyway. He was basically the backbone of our farm.

I turned and grinned at him, feeling happy as I imagined the evening ahead.

“Race you,” I said excitedly and he appeared surprised but up for it so I took off first, knowing that despite his exhaustion, he was going to outrun me. He was way more fit.

I laughed a little as I ran ahead of him in the soft rain and let out a small shriek when he caught up with me just before we reached the porch steps. Taking his hand, I dragged him inside

and locked the door, dumping everything on the floor before grabbing him and starting to kiss him again.

Freely and with abandon. With no one to stop us or walk in on us. It was the best feeling.

Oliver pressed me against the door as we made out but I stopped him and led him up to my room so we could get cleaned up.

“This is so cool.” I giggled as we shed our clothes and got in the shower a minute later, washing ourselves less and kissing each other more.

I couldn't get enough of his lips. Lips he had kept closed those first two times I'd tried to kiss him. But now they opened for me and devoured my own hungrily and eagerly.

We were lost in the passion soon. Even though I'd wanted to get him some food before, he was suddenly so hard against my tummy and his mouth was moving over my wet skin like I was the only thing he wanted to taste.

I gasped, hugging his solid, wet body to myself and feeling like I was going to throw a tantrum if he didn't fuck me soon. Last night and then just now at the stables, the timing had been off so my frustration was growing.

“Oliver, I need you,” I said to him huskily and he pressed his forehead to mine, water dripping all around us, clinging to our skin as we stared into each other's eyes and he finally pushed his dick inside me.

I started moaning and bucking my hips against his, desperate for an orgasm but also wanting him to keep thrusting as long as possible. The feeling of his dick inside my pussy all bare

and rock-solid was mind-blowing. My knees became wobbly so I clung to him tightly, whispering so many heated words which made no sense except I could hear the desperate pleading in my tone.

I wanted him to make me come. And then fuck me all over again. All night. To be wrapped in his arms with no clothes between us and no concern about school or his farm work or my parents.

It would be like that once we got out of Dreamhaven. Soon.

Oliver's hands kneaded my ass, keeping me tightly against him as he moved. With each thrust of his, I cried out. I wasn't at all quiet and the sound of my voice seemed to make him go crazy because we'd always had to whisper or remain quiet before. Tonight, I was really letting go and it was incredible.

"Just like that, yes, baby," I whined and hooked an arm around his neck while keeping the other on his waist.

His hard muscles rippled with his movements, his lips dripping water as I tasted and bit into them.

Oliver was panting by the time we both came, me with my head buried in the crook of his neck and him with his forehead pressed against the tiles, clinging to each other and overcome with so many different and powerful feelings and sensations.

He didn't even pull out as he began to soften. We stayed under the shower, just breathing each other in and not wanting to let go. It was the most perfect moment of my life.

~ ~ ~





## Chapter Twenty- Eight

### Oliver

I think I've finally realized what home feels like. This was probably as close to it as I would get because life had a tendency to screw me over and I refused to hope for anything better than this.

After our very intense shower session, Paige made sure I put on the sweatpants she had bought me. I wasn't sure what the fuss was about but she really seemed to enjoy seeing me in those. It was a bit uncomfortable for me because I was used to wearing jeans but I was willing to indulge her.

She made me burgers later and kept staring at my waist as I moved around the kitchen, feeling at ease in her presence and curious to see how she made those delicious things. My stomach growled and Paige glanced at me with something close to guilt in her eyes. God, it wasn't her fault. We both got a little carried away tonight and skipped over usual things like eating. I blamed my raging hormones. I really liked having sex with her and would never admit it to her but I wanted to do it one more time before I went to sleep. Maybe if she was okay with it.

I didn't like demanding things from her. Sometimes I still feared that she might shut me down although she had been

nothing but good to me for weeks now. None of her friends came over to bully me anymore. She took care of me and told me she loved me.

I was happy for the first time in my life and constantly trying to reassure myself that it wasn't a joke. That she was serious this time. But the fact that she'd dumped Rhys Walton for me was still unbelievable and felt more like a dream than reality.

Also, this feverish wanting between us seemed to grow stronger every day. She was always on my mind and I couldn't wait for the day to be over so I could see her again. It made me depressed when I didn't get a chance to be around her and I missed her so much, it physically hurt.

I was crazy about this girl. So crazy, it was frustrating when I had to hold it all in because of our situation.

"Here." She held a burger to my lips and waited until I took a bite before eating from it herself and smiling at me.

Her eyes were so excited and playful. She seemed really happy now which was puzzling because she had been crying in the stables not even an hour ago.

Paige handed me the plate of burger and went over to the fridge to get us something to drink while I continued eating, watching her in her short dress and telling myself to take it easy and not think with my dick.

I wanted to be able to give her all of myself and not just things related to sex even though that's all we ever felt like doing when we met up.

I smiled as I ate, thinking of all the times we had done it already and how good it had felt each time. But tonight, in the

shower, that had been out of this world. It made me want to push aside our dinner and put her on the table so I could devour her all over again.

I shifted uncomfortably when my thoughts had a pretty strong effect on my erection and turned away from her because these sweats made hiding a hard dick really difficult. It was less obvious when I wore jeans.

“Hi,” Paige said happily, smirking at me again as she came to stand next to me. “How is it?”

I prayed that she wouldn't look down as I chewed my food and nodded before giving her a thumbs-up. She tucked her tongue in her cheek and looked down. Deliberately. I tried not to squirm under her stare. These fucking pants.

She had a knowing grin on her face by the time her eyes reached mine and murmured, “You know I always read about it in books but seeing it happen up close. Wow.”

My expression was a mixture of embarrassment and confusion and she laughed.

“Guys in sweatpants, you know. Rock hard abs on display. The fabric hugging their hips so you can see that V plus the shape of their junk,” she explained in a pleased tone.

What kind of books was she reading?

I wanted to ask her so I could know more about what she liked but she handed me a can of soda and began loading the dishwasher, humming to herself and moving her hips to some upbeat, girlie song. I caught the words ‘Romeo’, ‘Juliet’ and ‘love story’ ‘ and smiled to myself again.

When she finally turned to me, her pretty eyes sparkled with love. For me. It made me grow serious as I took it all in. Shit, I needed to make love to this girl again. My fiancée. That's what she was. I mean, I had proposed to her and was determined to marry her one day. If things worked out.

She held out her hand to me and I took it before we headed upstairs. After using the bathroom and brushing our teeth, we climbed into her bed and snuggled while she played a movie on her laptop.

It was still raining softly outside and I closed my eyes just for a little while, stifling my yawn because I didn't want to fall asleep yet. I wanted more time with her.

Except for the light glare from her laptop screen, her room was dark and we were burrowed under the sheets, so close. Paige's attention was on the movie so I slowly laced her fingers with mine and placed a soft kiss on her bare shoulder.

She burrowed even closer, her back pressing into my chest and I started to get hard again. Feeling needy, I took her hand and placed it over my growing bulge, wanting her to stroke it.

I tried to be patient with her. Tried not to attack her or push myself on her if she wasn't in the mood because the number of times I had seen her ex do that in front of my eyes still made me grit my teeth in anger. If she said no, I would never ask her for anything physical.

But she never did. Her hand easily cupped my erection through the sweatpants and began to knead it.

"Someone's really horny tonight," she teased me in a breathy voice. It made me swell in her palm even more.

Paige rubbed me leisurely for a minute while I closed my eyes and nibbled on her earlobe. Then she turned and pushed me on to my back abruptly.

“I was supposed to give you a massage,” she pouted at me.

I didn't care about that. What I wanted was for her to massage my dick and just give me the relief I needed.

Paige got on top of me and I sighed, relaxing on the pillow and okay to let her do whatever she wanted. I was finding it harder and harder to keep my eyes open and was worried I might fall asleep in the middle of sex or something. The combination of feeling sleepy and turned on at the same time was incredible in its own way though. Like having some kind of lucid dream.

She cradled my hips with her thighs and placed her hands on my chest before starting to rub herself on my dick.

“I want to do it like this,” she told me while biting her lip. “I can see that you're tired, baby. We'll just dry hump. You feel amazing by the way.”

My dick was so hard, so full and heavy while she continued grinding herself on me and adjusting her position. I gasped as I held on to her hips before making her move on me the way I wanted until we were both just seeking friction, anything to relieve the ache.

If I was capable, I would have cried out from the powerful feelings overtaking my body and I experienced the wildest urge to flip her over and bury myself in her but I controlled it because it wasn't what she wanted. She wanted it like this.

“Yes, baby,” she said to me, closing her eyes and throwing her head back, moving faster and faster on me. “Mmmm.”

My vision burst into stars and I heard her cry out a second later while we both came hard, still writhing and trying to crawl into each other’s souls. That’s how it felt to me. This connection between us. Real and deep. It couldn’t be wishful thinking this time because I was sure she felt it too.

Still, it would break me if I turned around one day and found her laughing at me again with her friends and telling them what an idiot I was to have fallen for her games. How eagerly I had surrendered to her and how helpless she had made me.

Firmly, I shut down those thoughts as soon as they appeared and chose to hold her close instead, rubbing my hands up and down her spine. Paige wouldn’t do that to me again. I knew she wasn’t like that anymore.

...

My worst fear almost seemed to come true the next afternoon when I walked inside the living room after finishing up at the farm and heard Paige and her father talking in the kitchen.

I debated whether to walk back out or not because I didn’t want to interact with him and pretend like I wasn’t sleeping with his daughter and head over heels in love with her.

“Daddy, can you please send...um...this dude back to the stables?” I heard her ask in a voice that was full on diva and rich princess combined.

I frowned a little, dreading where this was going and stood there, unable to move.

“Why? You were the one who told me he was abusing his freedom, Paige,” her father replied, which didn’t even surprise me.

I knew she’d had something to do with it.

“Yeah but...I mean, it’s kind of weird now because you guys leave me alone at home-”

“The day the boy lays one finger on you, my sweet girl, is going to be the day he wishes he had never been born. Make no mistake about that.”

There was a stifling silence during which I didn’t even dare to breathe. His threats weren’t empty and we all were very much aware of that.

“Okay,” she mumbled after a while. “I just meant that...he doesn’t belong here and I’m getting fed up of it. I wish you’d just send him back, Daddy. I’m sure he’s learned his lesson by now.”

I didn’t understand why she was doing this. Why was she trying to send me away from her? Just last night, everything had been so perfect and I’d told myself she had changed. I didn’t think I could stay and listen to anymore so I opened the door quietly and left, making up my mind not to see her tonight. She was beginning to give me whiplash and after all



these weeks of love and closeness, my heart couldn't handle  
the fact that she was still capable of stabbing me in the back.





## Chapter Twenty-Nine

### Oliver

One of my favourite sights in the world happens to include stars on a clear night sky. To me, they represent freedom and limitless power. An awareness that there is more to know, more to *be* than plain old you. I camped near the orchard the first night I was let out of my basement prison, unable to prevent the smile of satisfaction from spreading across my mouth. Cool, riverside air drifted over me and added peace to the ambience. God, I'd missed this.

My phone vibrated in my pocket and I took it out to read the text from Paige.

### Why aren't you in your loft?

It was past eleven p.m and the last place she should be was in my loft. She'd obviously sneaked out to see me but I was in no mood to see her. I was still mad at her for getting her father to kick me out of the basement without even talking to me about it first. I realized later that she meant well, she'd wanted to secure my freedom because she knew how much I hated being trapped down there. But the thought of being able to see her every night if I wanted had made my living conditions bearable these past few weeks.

I still couldn't help myself from feeling a little resentful whenever they made decisions about me like I had no say in it. Just carted me from one place to another like I was a piece of cargo.

**I'm out**, I texted back.

I watched the bubbles rise and fall as she typed before her reply came through.

**Out where, Oliver? I want to see you.**

I sighed because now I wanted to see her too but I couldn't ask her to ride out here this time of the night and I hated the thought of returning to the stables. I kind of liked being outside right now.

I lay down there for a while trying to figure out how to tell her that without hurting her feelings.

**Oliver, I'm naked in your bed. If you don't come here right now, I'm finishing by myself.**

I sat up so fast, I think I almost broke some world record. She wasn't being fair but my suddenly aching and energized body didn't seem to understand the concept.

...

It was the same madness. Her reaching desperately for me and me not being able to help myself from responding. She really was naked in my bed and had brought me some extra blankets and more clothes which I hardly looked at as I got between the sheets with her.

“Baby, I missed you so much,” she said and her throaty words coursed through my veins, adding to my desire and causing me to kiss her more roughly.

God, I loved it when she called me that. It just felt so intimate, so loving and sexy. Like I was all hers.

I pinned her wrists above her head as I kissed her, enjoying the feeling of making her a little helpless. Not sure why I liked it but I did. It made her move more urgently against me and hardened my dick unlike anything else.

Taking her nipples in my mouth, I sucked on them gently one by one, wetting them with my tongue and then letting go with a light pop.

Few sounds managed to please me in this world but the sounds Paige and I made together when we were touching each other was right up there on my favorites list.

So I did it again. With both her nipples. And she groaned and lifted her hips a little to rub her naked pussy over my crotch. I actually hadn't known what to call it at first aside from the clinical terms but she'd whispered it in my ear so many times that it was the only word I had for it now.

*Put your hand on my pussy, Oliver. Eat my pussy, Oliver. Do you want this pussy, baby?*

My Paige liked talking dirty and I was glad. She covered enough bases to make up for my lack of it.

She was doing it now, moaning and murmuring all kinds of sexy things to me while I continued to kiss and suck her breasts. My dick started to throb and finally, I let go of her hands because I wanted them on me.

She pushed me on my back and sat up to unzip my jeans and remove my clothes, moonlight filtering through my open windows. I tried not to enjoy the sight of her breasts jiggling too much but it was difficult and I couldn't help my hands from going up to cup them and then massage them, loving it when her nipples grew even more tight and pointy.

Her mouth was on me seconds later, making me feel good down there. I remembered to hold back her hair this time because sometimes, in the heat of desire, I forgot to do that and she had to remind me.

“Beautiful,” she whispered and my eyes grew hooded as I lost myself to the sensation. After a while, Paige raised her head and stared at me with wide eyes before asking, “You want to do it to me while I do it to you?”

What? How was that even humanely possible? And then it clicked and I raised my eyebrows, my heart increasing its rhythm while I wondered if I could even pull it off. If she meant what I thought she meant, that is.

“I've never done it,” she confessed and bit her lip nervously.

I was a little nervous as well but I reached out to wrap my hand around one of her thighs and tug on it slightly. My heartbeats went nuts at this new, thrilling position we were going to try and Paige blew out a slow breath before moving towards me, her thighs cradling my shoulders now as she hovered above me.

Without thinking too much, I gripped her ass and lowered her on to my waiting mouth. A lusty groan ensued from her throat which told me she was already starting to enjoy it.

We did that for about a minute or so, just me eating her pussy while she sucked on my dick and then I really got into it, jutting my tongue in and out of her and sucking on the sensitive parts. She called it eating pussy so I was determined to feast on it to give the term justice.

My enthusiasm caught onto hers and she made all these sexy noises while licking my dick, her hand on my balls and her tits rubbing on my abdomen. I was about to burst. It became a race to see who could get there faster and she beat me to it, coming in my mouth while I swallowed it all.

Then it was my turn to climax and it ripped through me so hard, I dug my fingers into her thighs.

“Oliver, fuck,” she let out a long sigh before she moved off me and fell flat on her back, looking up at the ceiling of my loft.

“What in the world did we just do?” she giggled and snuggled into me. “I can’t believe I tried something like that.”

I couldn’t believe it either but I was definitely doing it again now that I knew how awesome it felt.

Later, we cleaned up and changed into sleeping clothes before getting back in bed to snuggle. I felt so satisfied and content. Everything was going great. It was all so perfect just like the other night had been. And then Paige opened her mouth and ruined it all.

“Oliver...what happened to you? Was it an injury of some sort or were you born with it?”

Depression, heavy and oppressive pressed down on my chest and I didn’t feel like holding her anymore. Why did she have

to bring that up now of all times when I was so happy and ready to fall asleep in her arms?

To remind me of my disability. The thing that had enabled her to bully me over the years because she knew I wouldn't be able to stand up for myself using my voice. All the pain she had caused me came rushing back like some huge tidal wave, destructive and unstoppable. Yes, I could forgive her for it but I didn't want to relive it. I didn't want to relive any of it. Not even what happened before I met her.

"I'm sorry," she said when she noticed me stiffen. "I'm just trying to understand. Sometimes, I feel like you can talk if you tried and when you laugh or make some kind of sound which I thought you couldn't make, it just makes me think that there's a cure, you know."

As soon as she used the word 'cure', something inside me snapped and I shut down my feelings for her in every way I could think of before removing my arms from her body.

It wasn't some disease. I thought she accepted me for who I was now, for the way I was.

"Oliver, shit, I didn't mean it like that." Paige sat up and looked at me. "I'm just trying to help you. Please, don't get mad."

I sat up as well and dragged my fingers through my hair, the words I had tried years to forget haunting me again.

*Shut up, boy.* Evil eyes boring into mine.

*Shut your fucking mouth before I shut it for you.* Hatred spilling from his tone.



*How many times have I asked you not to speak in front of me? A death stare, the false calm before an eruption.*

*If I ever hear another peep out of you, I will cut off your fucking tongue. The glint of a butcher knife.*

I clamped my lips shut tightly and instinctively breathed harder and faster, putting my hands up to close them over my mouth, trying to keep any and all sounds inside. A whimper escaped anyway and I hated myself for it.

I rocked back and forth, trying to control the thing in my chest but it was making my eyes burn. The effort it took me to remain silent while he kept yelling at me and looking like he wanted to kill me.

“Oliver.”

Her hand touched me and I shoved it away, pressing myself tightly against the wall, to get as far away from her as possible. Didn't she see? Didn't she realize that I *couldn't* speak? *I couldn't*.

There was no cure for this, I reminded myself as I shook my head in the dark and wished she would leave me alone.

I didn't have to be fixed by people like her who would never understand what it was like to be broken in the first place.

“Baby, please, look at me.”

Her voice was soft and concerned but I didn't care in that moment. I was way past feeling any sort of compassion for her after what she had called my speechlessness.

I made myself look at her though. Letting the hate shine through from my eyes, the anger vibrate through me before my

lips moved and I mouthed the one word I could without losing my mind.

‘Leave.’





## Chapter Thirty

### Paige

He was being such a drama queen. Honestly, I got that the subject was sensitive and difficult for him. But I hadn't *known* he would react like that. It wasn't like I did it on purpose. I realized later that I should have chosen my words carefully and not just tried to spring the issue on him without warning.

It was the first time I had ever seen him react like that. I guessed it was due to some past trauma, some sort of trigger. But my intentions hadn't been to hurt him. I honestly believed that Oliver could be...helped. That there was something fixable regarding his condition. I'd tried to Google mutism and there were so many different things to consider, so many ways it could affect a person, its causes and proper therapy. If he wouldn't even consider talking to me about it, how was I going to get him help from a professional?

It was frustrating for me and I hated that he was now using my careless approach as a reason to treat me like the enemy. It was like that one slip-up of mine just reminded him that that was what I had been to him for years. He'd wanted me, hadn't he? He'd chosen to be with me despite the fact that I had warned him of all the ways I was capable of screwing it up.

And now, after our first real obstacle as a couple, he was being cold and moody.

How was he going to handle being married to me in the future? I sat on my bed, studied the 'ring' on my finger and scoffed, wanting to get rid of it but not being able to.

Letting out an exasperated breath, I texted him for the twentieth time that day, the day after our fight. It was nine pm now. I'd sneaked out to see him earlier and he hadn't been in the barn. He wasn't replying to my messages either. I was public enemy number one again.

Curling up in bed, I felt myself grow so frustrated, I almost went to my father and demanded that he make Oliver come and stay with us in the basement again. I didn't care. He couldn't run away from me here.

I hated the angst and uncertainty of not knowing where he was, what he was doing and who he was talking to.

Sitting up again, I stared out the window and licked my lips, frowning to myself. What if he was tired of me already? What if he had decided that I wasn't good enough after all and was going to give Rayne a chance?

What if he was with my best friend right this very moment, going behind my back and doing stuff he only did with me?

I dropped my face in my hands and groaned. Shit. I was going nuts. Love was making me paranoid. This guy was fucking with my head again and I hated feeling so powerless because of a boy.

*That'll be your weakness and we can't be weak, Paige or else they will take advantage of you.*

No. My father's words from over the years tried to drown out the sympathy I was feeling for Oliver and I crushed them in some corner of my mind, not letting them take root again. I was going to be kind. I was going to be patient. I needed to understand that he wasn't trying to do this to me on purpose. He was just in pain.

I tried to call him one last time just to see if he would pick up and I could at least hear him breathe or something but he didn't and I went to bed angry, holding the tears at bay because I didn't want to be that girl who cried herself to sleep over a guy.

My last message to him before I fell asleep had been: **Miss you.**

And when I woke up in the morning, finally, there was a reply waiting for me.

**Miss you more.**





## Chapter Thirty-One

### Oliver

“Babe, you’re wearing this.”

Her tone was final and unwavering and I made a face in response, hating the sight of the tux she was showing me.

I shook my head but she wasn’t having any of it and sat me down on her bed before calmly saying, “You’re wearing that and you’re going with me, Oliver. I didn’t use my powers in the prom committee to wrangle a masquerade-themed dance for this year for nothing.”

She put her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes at me. “I’m taking my boyfriend...my *fiancé* to the prom with me and that’s it. Don’t argue with me.”

I raised an eyebrow at her last statement and she rolled her eyes at me.

“You know what I mean.”

Then she climbed on top of me and settled on my lap, circling her arms around my shoulders, smelling and feeling so good.

“I love you. I want you to have this experience with me. Two more weeks, baby and we’ll be out of here.”



She buried her face in my neck and kissed me softly. “Just you and me. An apartment. Lots of freedom. Plus really hot sex.”

I shifted slightly at the ‘hot sex’ part and Paige giggled because she could feel me getting hard now.

It was a Friday afternoon, a week after our ‘argument’ and we were hanging out in her room. Her dad was out somewhere while her mum was taking a nap. Paige had locked the door and assured me that we won’t be interrupted.

She brought her lips to mine and hummed something, starting to roll her hips in a lazy manner. I thought of how much I hated the idea of going to her high school prom with her because I wasn’t used to parties, dances and crowds. And it was in Cedarfield at her preppy school with those preppy kids. So unpleasant and risky. I could get in a lot of trouble for that but she told me she had everything planned out so I would be safe. We would both be.

Still, when she glanced up at my face, I gave her a pleading look and mouthed, ‘Don’t make me do this.’

Paige responded by giving me an innocent look and blinked at me.

“What? You mean this?”

She held on to my shoulders, raised herself a little on her knees and then dropped her hips to grind herself against my crotch.

Shit.

What was she doing? We both knew how this was going to end if she didn’t stop and her mother was right down the hall.

“Or do you mean this?” she asked before lowering the straps of her cute, white dress and revealing her breasts to me.

Okay, I was done. I give up. I couldn't say no to her when she was all over me like this.

Paige was beautiful and I was in love. I stood no chance.

We kissed hungrily, moving together at the same time, needy and horny, not worried about anything but finding satisfaction for now.

She took my shirt off and then climbed off me so I could remove my jeans and then she was back on the bed, placing wet kisses all over my chest and making me hard as a pole. Jesus.

“This body is to die for,” she told me and grabbed my neck as she fell back on the bed, pulling me down with her.

It was all frenzied kissing, licking and sucking for about five minutes before she flipped on her stomach and began to rub her ass against my dick.

I closed my eyes tightly and gritted my teeth at the feeling, panting like I'd run a mile. At first I let her carry on like that. But then instinct took over and I wound an arm around her waist, pulling her up so that her hips were off the bed.

This was another new position for us and as usual, I experienced that mixture of thrill and nervousness before pushing my dick inside her wet heat. My teeth clamped down on my bottom lip and I inhaled deeply at the wonderful feeling of burying myself inside her inch by inch.

Slowly, I leaned forward over her to turn her face towards mine, needing to kiss her, to make sure she was there in the

moment with me. To make sure that we were both feeling the same intense emotions and not only the sexual kind.

‘I love you.’ My lips moved and she parted them with her own, pushing her tongue inside me as we got lost in our own rhythm, our bodies totally in sync while giving in to the lust.

Paige didn’t make a sound as I took her body from behind, and our mouths never stopped ravaging each other, my one hand bracing my weight on the bed and the other in her soft, blonde hair, holding her to me.

My dick was coated with her wetness and it was the best feeling in the world. I didn’t want it to be over but we could never make it last.

Towards the end, she let out a long, drawn-out moan into my mouth and I gasped, sweating and out of breath as we finished cumming and collapsed on to the bed.

I closed my eyes and stayed like that for so long, not wanting to pull out. God, I loved this girl so much. I didn’t know how I was going to wait two more weeks for her to graduate and then run away with me.

I wanted to spend all my days and nights with her without restrictions.

We intertwined our fingers and Paige seemed content to have my weight over hers as we dozed off, uncaring about anything else. It was such a tiny world I had built with her and yet, it was everything to me.

I belonged to her. And in some ways, this had always been my real enslavement.

...

I was so excited that night. The night of the prom. Even though I hadn't wanted to go when she first told me about it, Paige's joy had rubbed off on me. She really wanted me to be there and had prepared for it so it helped in changing my mind and getting me in the right mood eventually. It was that one last memorable thing she wanted us to do together before we could leave Dreamhaven and start a new life somewhere.

Once my work for the day was over (it had taken longer than I'd anticipated), I reached the barn and checked my messages. Shit. Paige was already sounding a little put off and it didn't sit well with me. I decided to type out a quick reply to let her know that I was about to shower and get dressed when I heard footsteps outside the stable and stuffed my phone in the nearest bale of hay. Thank God it was on silent mode. The steps were heavy, not hers but not Simon's either.

It was a surprise to find Scott Hamilton entering the stables this time of the night. I could count on one hand the number of times he had bothered to come and see me here since I had arrived in Dreamhaven 5 years ago. I was usually the one who was summoned by either Simon or one of the boys. But whenever he did show up, it wasn't good. He either had a job for me or simply wanted to exercise his power.

We exchanged a dry look once he was inside while I stood there, tense and bracing myself for whatever words were about to come out of his mouth.

“You done for the day?” he asked me and to my shock, his voice was actually...pleasant.

Which made me even more suspicious. I just gave him a brief nod as an answer. Scott put his hands in his pockets, looking me up and down. There was a dragged out silence before he moved closer and put his hand on my shoulder. My teeth ground together at the contact but I remained calm and just waited for him to say something else.

“I know I haven’t been a father to you,” he spoke emotionlessly. “It’s been difficult for you but I have to say, Oliver. You’ve handled everything extremely well over the years.”

My breath clogged in my throat when he said my name and my mouth fell open slightly. I couldn’t help it. That was such a shock. I’d thought he didn’t even remember my name.

“You’ve proven yourself to me,” Scott continued and patted my shoulder before stepping away. “However, there’s one more thing I need you to do for me tonight before I’m ready to believe you truly deserve to be a part of my family. To be the son I never had.”

Nothing about his little speech touched me. I was absolutely numb listening to him say the words that could only mean something dreadful. I couldn’t stop the heavy feeling in my chest from squeezing my heart and making me wish he hadn’t come here. He wanted something from me and it was something so big, so fucked up that he thought he had to soothe me into obeying him before I did it.

This was a thousand times worse. Scott knew that his one order was enough to make me run errands for him. He knew I

would never rebel. Not if I wanted to stay here. I just prayed that he hadn't found out what the reason behind my obedience really was. Or who it was.

"Put on a clean shirt, boy," he told me and still, his voice was not cold or tough. "I need you to come with me to Cedarfield."

Shit. I bit my lip, knowing that it was almost seven-thirty and Paige was going to go nuts if I didn't show up. I couldn't make excuses with Scott but I had to let her know that I might not be able to make it tonight. My gaze strayed to the bale of hay where my phone was hidden but Scott finally lost his patience and snapped at me.

"Now, Oliver," he said my name again, except this time, it was with a scowl while he waited for me to move.

I went upstairs hurriedly to change my t-shirt, glancing out the window of my loft as I did so. The one that was directly opposite to Paige's room. I couldn't catch a glimpse of her at all and considered scribbling her a quick note but Scott barked at me again, keeping his gaze trained on me and I didn't get a chance. My heartbeats were irregular and anxiety gripped me as I descended the ladder and followed Scott out to his truck. Why was he taking me with him to Cedarfield? He'd never allowed me to set foot outside this town before.

I threw one last look over my shoulder towards Paige's window, hoping she would at least see me leaving with her father and wouldn't think that I'd forgotten our plans or changed my mind. But there was no sign of her and I couldn't make it too obvious to her dad that I was stalling on purpose. Maybe it won't take that long.

I wished she'd wait for me as I got in the truck with Scott, feeling uncomfortable and resentful as he started it and we headed towards the road leading out of the farm.







## Chapter Thirty-Two

### Paige

Either something was very, very wrong or Oliver had decided to ditch me. It was almost eight and he hadn't even texted me back. I'd come out of the shower to find my phone screen blank and my attempts to call him, so I'd at least know he was okay if he picked up, had only resulted in being sent to voicemail. Shit, why wasn't he picking up? He told me he wouldn't be late but I knew things sometimes took longer when it came to farm work.

Dad's truck was not here so I knew he was out. I lingered in the kitchen, pretending to make coffee but instead, was waiting for my mother to get busy so I could slip out to the barn.

"When is Rhys coming to pick you up, honey?" Mum asked me as she placed some dishes in the cupboards.

They thought Rhys was taking me to the prom and I hadn't corrected them so I just shrugged and said, "He'll be on his way soon. He's...um...he's running late."

She nodded and gave me a smile, telling me I looked beautiful. Yeah, well, I needed to hear that from my boyfriend. Or at least smile as he mouthed those words to me because

watching those sexy lips move was always a treat. If he would just *text me back*.

“I’m going to go hop in the shower, sweetie,” my mother finally said the magical words I’d been expecting.

“Okay,” I said a little too quickly and cheerfully and she gave me a strange look before leaving.

I waited about two minutes before slipping out the front door and sneaking off. The barn was dimly lit and I checked the stables quickly before calling out Oliver’s name and going up to the loft.

I frowned when I saw that his tux was lying at the foot of the bed untouched and so were the new shoes I had gotten him. An impatient sigh escaped me and I looked around in frustration before calling his phone again. I swear if he had left his phone here, I was going to kill him. He *knew* how special tonight was for me. It was senior prom for God’s sake. I wanted to go with him, the guy I was in love with.

When my call went to voicemail again, I sniffed a little as tears formed in my eyes and I sat on his bed for a while, my heart refusing to believe that he had actually stood me up. That wasn’t his style. If he really had decided not to go, Oliver would tell me.

Making up my mind to go look for him, I climbed down the ladder again, careful not to ruin my dress, and headed outside. Then I stopped because our farm was 400 acres in size and he could be anywhere. The orchard was kind of far as well and I always had to ride a horse out there or run as fast as I could. I couldn’t do that right now after getting all dressed up.

“Oliver,” I said in irritation and sent him another text before going back to the house.

I will wait. For half an hour more. Pretty sure he was late doing chores but he would come to me. I went upstairs and paced my room, checking out the window every five minutes but he still hadn't shown up twenty minutes later.

I was getting so mad now. I was getting pissed. Obviously, some things were more important to him than doing this for me. He could have at least let me know, right? Instead of leaving me hanging.

A call came through on my phone then and I got stupidly excited before I saw that it was from Rhys. God, I hadn't had a good conversation with him in days now. In school, I ignored him and he left me alone. He had some stuff going on which I wasn't interested in knowing so I minded my own business.

“What?” I grumbled, flopping down on the bed and then remembering my hair. Oh well. Highly unlikely that I was going to go anywhere now.

“Hey, baby.” Rhys sounded like his usual arrogant self and I could hear the grin in his voice. “Where are you?”

“What's it to you?”

He let out a breath. “I was hoping you'd save me a dance for later and couldn't find you. Did you and stable guy decide to run away or something?”

I stayed quiet, hurting a little at the reminder of Oliver. He couldn't even keep one promise to me but he wanted us to have a future.

“Paige? You there?” Rhys sounded concerned for once and I suddenly wished he was with me.

Yeah, he was a jerk but he’d always seemed to like me even if what we had wasn’t deep. I had kind of shut Rayne out too because I hadn’t wanted her to come around too often now that I was with Oliver. I just didn’t want her near him so I made excuses whenever she wanted to hang out. We did talk in school but it wasn’t the same. Suddenly, I just felt alone, thinking how caught up I had become in my relationship that I had no friends left.

“Rhys?” I said softly, trying not to cry. “Who did you go to the prom with?”

He laughed on the other end. “Nobody,” he replied flippantly. “I was actually waiting for you to change your mind and finally decide to go with me.”

I rolled my eyes because he was bullshitting me. He probably had a dozen dates lined up for tonight. But I was glad he had called to check up on me.

“Are you at home?” he asked me suddenly and again, I didn’t answer, feeling embarrassed to admit that Oliver had backed out of our plans.

“Paige, do you want me to come pick you up?”

I wasn’t sure if I should let him do that because of our history. But then, why was I even worrying when my boyfriend, my fiancé, didn’t even care about me right now? It wasn’t as if I was cheating on him. Rhys was nothing more to me than a friend now. And I was *not* going to miss senior

prom over some guy. This was my night and I was going to go and have fun. With or without Oliver.

“I’ll be there in ten, yeah?” Rhys said, not waiting for me to agree or respond before he cut the call.

...

Fifteen minutes later, I was speeding towards Cedarfield in Rhys’ sports car, my mood totally turned off and my mouth in a perpetual pout. I wasn’t even bothering to check my phone anymore. Fuck him. I wasn’t going to speak to him until after graduation. I’ll ignore the shit out of him and see how he liked it.

Walton Prep had a set schedule of finals, prom and then graduation spaced out within three weeks of each other every year. I hadn’t cared much for finals but prom and graduation were important to me and he didn’t get to ruin it.

“What’s that?” Rhys suddenly grabbed my hand and held it up to the dashboard light.

I snatched it away and frowned. “Stop touching me.”

He started laughing loudly and making me regret agreeing to ride with him. It was a reminder that he would forever be that obnoxious jerk who knew nothing about respecting boundaries.

“Did he put that on your finger?” he mocked me and I folded my arms and stared out the window, watching the houses

blurring past and other cars on the freeway.

“Oh my god, Paige, are you really going to marry the town mute?”

God, I wished he would shut up. I wanted him to stop the car now so I didn't have to sit here and listen to this.

“He's a smart fucker, that one,” Rhys continued in an amused voice. “I mean, I always knew that but it was still fun to call him a dumbass, watch him cry and struggle to speak. Wasn't it, baby?”

I ignored him. Five more minutes and I would be at Walton Prep, get as far away from this psycho as possible and just figure out a way to enjoy my prom.

“Now he's making *you* cry and it's just funny to me that you'd fall for that. You, Paige Hamilton, the mean girl, the popular girl. The girl who's supposed to be smart and proud. The girl who bullied him all throughout his teens. Even the innocent ones thrive upon getting revenge, don't they? Would you like me to beat him up for you again? I'll make sure to break a few bones this time.”

“Shut the hell up, Rhys!” I snapped at him. “What is wrong with you? He isn't like you, okay! He isn't vindictive. You couldn't even match up to an inch of him.”

Again, Rhys laughed sadistically and shook his head, taking too much pleasure in my torment. “Oh, baby,” he crooned and glanced at me. “I know it sucks to admit but you need to see what the real deal is here. I hate to be the one to have to tell you...no, wait...actually, I don't. I mean, you fucking dumped me for a stable boy,” he stressed and ran a hand through his

hair. “A fucking mute. Not a penny to his name, no education. Nothing. Hope it was worth it. Getting played.”

“He isn’t playing me!” I screamed at him, clenching my fists. “You don’t know him, Rhys Walton! You don’t know shit.”

A scoff escaped his mouth. “You’re just blinded by love. I saw how he got that night when he thought he had a chance to knock me out. I saw the fire of revenge burning in his eyes. He would’ve thrashed me if my boys hadn’t taken him down. Your little farm boy isn’t as innocent as you think.”

“Stop the car. I don’t want to hear your crap. Just fucking let me out.”

“Are you crazy? Let you out in the freeway at night looking like that. Don’t be stupid.”

“Then shut the fuck up!”

He blew out a breath and actually listened to me for once while I sat there, stewing in doubt and misery. He was so wrong. I knew what Oliver was like and revenge wasn’t his style. He wasn’t devious or cunning like us. He didn’t go out of his way to make someone else miserable. He would never hurt me like that.

So why wasn’t he with me right now? Why wasn’t he responding to my calls and messages? Why, why in the fuck, was he making me feel like this?

Is this what Dad meant about the dangers of letting those beneath us get the better of us? Did Oliver want to teach me a lesson, watch me grovel for his love and attention?

I chewed on my lip and leaned back in my seat, taking deep breaths and trying to stop thinking like that. I needed to trust

him. I needed to believe in his goodness. It was innate and profound and none of my hatred had ever corrupted him. Rhys was an ass. And he was currently making that even more evident.

*“Romeo take me somewhere we can be alone... You’ll be the prince and I’ll be the princess. It’s a love story, baby, just say yes... Marry me, Juliet, you never have to be alone...”*

He was singing in a high-pitched voice and then laughing like a maniac while tears welled up in my eyes and started to run down my cheeks. I didn’t even care that he would see me and tease. It wasn’t really his behaviour that was hurting me.

It was the fear that it could all be true. That my whole relationship with Oliver had been nothing but a plan for him to get back at me, to hurt me, to show me *my* place. To finally seek revenge for all the pain and humiliation he had suffered because of me.

“I’m sorry,” Rhys said quietly, sobering up. “Oh, come on, Paige, I was just- Look, don’t cry. Fuck, don’t cry over that motherfucker. He’s a *nobody*. You’re a Hamilton, come on. I just saw you post that song in your stories the other day and it wouldn’t get out of my head. Sorry.”

“I hate you,” I told him, snapping open the sun visor mirror and checking out my reflection.

My makeup was ruined and I wanted to scream with frustration and anger. I hated Oliver too in that moment.

Wordlessly, I got to work fixing my face so I wouldn’t have to go to prom looking like a raccoon and to his credit, my asshole ex boyfriend kept his mouth shut the rest of the way.



But what good was that going to do now? He had already planted those seeds of doubt in my mind and now they were quickly taking root and filling my heart with poison.

If Oliver really had played me...

I was going to make him regret it. He wasn't going to get away with it.

I was my father's daughter after all. He should have remembered that before he decided to act smart with me.





## Chapter Thirty-Three

### Oliver

It was so cold here that I was beginning to shiver. I'd forgotten to grab my hoodie in the middle of leaving in a rush with Scott. We were in some kind of warehouse in Cedarfield near the docks and I had no idea what the hell I was doing here. The warehouse was not that large, stacked with crates and bags of things I didn't know about. It was brightly-lit but Scott had slid the door shut after we had entered, shutting us off from the sight and sound of the river outside and the numerous boats and yachts anchored in the harbor.

Even though our towns were both close to the river, it was Cedarfield that specialized in fishing businesses. Dreamhaven was mostly known for farming due to the rich land present throughout most of our town. It felt strange being here and that tight feeling in my gut wouldn't fade. Neither would the sadness when I thought of Paige waiting for me back home, all dressed up and disappointed. It was already past nine and I was pretty sure she was beyond mad at me by now. I'd have so much making up to do when I got back. A week's worth probably, knowing her.

I hated that I was letting her down on this night. She'd planned it to the last detail and had been so happy. I'd also

been dying to see her in that dress. Blue and satiny with ruffles and what not. She would've looked stunning and all of it would have been for me.

"Figures he'd be late," I heard Scott mutter from where he was leaning against a stack of crates.

I had no idea who he was talking about but it wasn't like I could ask him. A minute later, I heard the sound of a car outside and Scott straightened, walking over to the wooden doors to greet whoever the newcomer was.

"Walton," I heard him say and frowned when I realized who he was meeting up with.

It had to be Patrick because I didn't know any other Walton who was in business with Scott. Sure enough, it was the old man, looking distinguished in his three piece suit and out of place here in the shabby warehouse.

He was tall and carried himself with the confidence of someone who was extremely powerful and successful, kind of like how Scott did, although with Patrick Walton, the demeanour was natural and smooth, having spent all his life with a silver spoon in his mouth, I guess. Scott was new money.

The other man paused when he saw me and threw Scott an irritated look.

"I thought we were meeting alone," he said in a disgruntled tone.

"He's not important," my foster *father* dismissed with a wave of his hand. "Besides, not like he can say anything about this."

Scott's ignorance still managed to amaze me. The number of times he had seen me with a book in my hands and he still thought I didn't have any other way to express myself, like *writing*. He probably thought that years of not attending school had dumbed me down or something. Not that I would tell anyone anything about what Scott did or didn't do. I mean, I wasn't even interested but it was still puzzling trying to figure out why my presence here was required when he had just said I wasn't important.

"Am I supposed to find this amusing, Hamilton?" Patrick questioned, narrowing his dark eyes at me. "If he isn't going to talk then why the fuck is he here? He can't be a bodyguard for you because frankly, teenage boys don't scare me. I have one in my family who thinks he's such a terror, it's laughable."

"He was just along to run an errand," Scott lied, making my hackles rise. Something wasn't right here.

"All right but I still don't see why you couldn't just come to my manor. I take it you're still sore about having to remain under my thumb and don't want people to know?" Patrick questioned in an arrogant tone.

It was subtle but I did notice Scott clenching his jaw and shooting Patrick a cold look when the old man glanced away.

"I wanted to make a deal with you, Walton," Scott said in a gritty voice. "I want my farm back. I'm willing to pay off the rest of what I owe you but I want it under my name. Sole proprietorship. No partnership."

Wow. This was news to me. All this time, I had thought that Scott owned the farm and Patrick was a client. I looked at Scott in surprise, realising that I hadn't just been working my

ass off every day for one man but two. Yes. Other people did too but they were employees and Scott never made them work any longer than they had to because he didn't want to part with more money than was necessary. I was not paid so he could use me as much as he wanted and reap all the benefits. Everyone knew I did almost double my share of work, more than Simon even. I was the foot soldier.

“You called me all the way out here for this?” Patrick asked with a scoff. “I thought you would have another business proposition for me, something that would benefit me. My time is precious, Hamilton.”

“Always thinking about making money, aren't you, Patrick, even though you have more than most people in the world could only dream of?”

“You would too if you were smarter,” was the old man's quick reply and a smirk curved his lips. “For instance, if you were smarter, you wouldn't have brought this insane proposal to me. Why should I sell my share of the farm to you when it's making me so much profit?”

“Because I'm tired of you calling the shots. You have a whole fucking town. Dreamhaven farm is all I have. All my daughter will have. Years ago, I was prepared to beg for her. I worked hard to be able to buy half the shares and now I'm willing to buy out the entire thing. You don't need it. Sell it to me.”

Patrick studied Scott for a minute, his expression almost amused. “I know I don't *need* it,” he replied lightly. “I don't *need* anything, as a matter of fact. But it is partially mine. I felt sorry for you and did you a favor, letting you buy those shares.

I thought it wouldn't hurt to allow you to feel important to some extent. But don't forget who owns you. Who owns both these towns, Hamilton. You will never have full power anywhere. Stop wasting my time."

"You're going to regret this," Scott spat out as Patrick turned to go. "I'm asking you very nicely. *Let me buy out the farm.*"

"Or what?" Patrick asked in a tougher voice this time. "Don't tell me you're going to resort to threats now. Have you forgotten who I am? Just how many connections I have? If anything were to happen to me-"

"No one will give a fuck," was Scott's vehement response.

It startled me a little. Scott may be a powerful man in his own right but the Waltons were like royalty. You didn't mess with them or challenge them.

Unless they got in your face and started insulting the girl you loved in the middle of a public restaurant.

"Be careful how you talk to me," Patrick warned but it had no effect on Scott as he sneered at the older man.

"Tell me. Who else knows that you came here to see me?"

Patrick was quiet as he regarded Scott with narrowed eyes.

"Alexander?" Scott probed and smiled nastily. "He's the only one you told, right? Your only son and heir to a mass fortune. The only one who gets to benefit in every way if you're no longer around."

My heartbeats grew faster as I took in what Scott was saying, what he was alluding to. No. It couldn't be this. He hadn't brought me here to witness this. Please, God, no.

“Just what the hell are you implying?” Patrick demanded, his nostrils flaring and stance aggressive now that he realized Scott really did not have any good intentions for calling him here.

“I asked you nicely. You insisted on showing me your power. Just like you did years ago when I was a nobody. Just like you will continue to do if I don’t take care of this now.”

It felt like slow motion almost, watching Scott remove the gun from inside his jacket and aim it at Patrick.

I was frozen for only a second before moving towards them, instinct telling me to stop this before it got out of hand. Save that man.

Scott pointed a finger at me even though his gaze and aim remained on Patrick.

“Stop, boy,” he said curtly. “Don’t come any closer.”

It was honed in me. The obedience. The servitude. Even though I hated it, I complied. I knew I didn’t stand a chance against an armed Scott but how was I supposed to sit back and let this happen?

“You are not going to get away with this,” Patrick growled. “Think long and hard about what you’re doing, Hamilton. You aren’t above the law. People will figure out that something happened to me. You will lose it all.”

Scott’s smile was twisted and that was when we heard the sound of another car outside. No, wait. That was a truck. That was Simon’s truck. I’d know that sound anywhere. Helplessly, I stood by and watched as Simon entered the warehouse, his walk aggressive and proud as usual, followed by the mayor of



Dreamhaven, and another man who was a cop at Dreamhaven police department. This was not looking good at all.

“William?” Patrick breathed in confusion, his gaze lingering on the mayor. “What the hell is going on here?”

Rayne’s father walked over to stand alongside Scott and gave Patrick a lazy shrug. “What does it look like, Walton? We’re taking back our town. One place to rule isn’t enough for you. You’re slowly seeping into our boundaries and we want our turf back.”

“You bastards, I made you who you are today,” Patrick said through gritted teeth. “My death will lead to an investigation. You cannot and will not get away with something so big. Use your fucking heads.”

“Oh we did,” Scott drawled then and outright grinned at the other man, seeming more confident now that his friends had joined him.

The sick feeling in my gut only grew worse as the seconds passed.

“We’ve covered all our bases. No one knows your location except for your son and trust me, he won’t be reporting that you’re missing anytime soon. We’ll be long gone by then,” Scott continued easily. “As for the investigation, of course it’ll happen. If there’s a murder, we’re going to need a killer as well, no?”

It was Simon who looked at me then. The other men were all looking at each other but Simon was staring right at me, his face calm, eyes deadly and cold.

I fought the instinct to run. I knew I'd never get far if they all decided to chase me. I was up against four grown men with vehicles and one of them had a gun. Two if you counted the cop. My skin grew cold and clammy, my heart almost up to my throat. The only person I thought about was Paige.

Paige. Paige. Paige.

I began to shake my head slightly, pleading with them not to do this. Not to involve me in this. Why did it have to be me? What did I ever do to any of them? The cop was siding with them too and I knew no one would believe me. No one would hear me out. I wouldn't be able to scream my innocence or talk or explain. They would laugh when the cop read me my right to remain silent. I had no possible motive to commit this murder but I didn't doubt they would come up with an elaborate one just to be able wash their hands off me and walk away unscathed.

Simon curled his lips at me, appearing as though he enjoyed my fear and desperation.

"Boy, come here."

I stayed frozen, not able to make my feet move when Scott issued the command. My eyes were already filling up with tears. I was so afraid, so damn confused. They couldn't find any other scapegoat. They targeted me because I couldn't open my mouth.

"Come here, Oliver!" Scott commanded but I held my ground.

I wasn't going to let them make me do this. I wasn't killing anyone. Not again.

Scott looked at his right hand man, the one built like a lumberjack who started to move towards me determinedly, knowing he would easily overpower me.

Yes, I was strong physically but not as strong as him. I swallowed past the tightness of my throat and backed away a few steps but Simon shook his head at me, his expression promising me something evil.

“Didn’t you hear what Scott said?” he asked, narrowing his eyes at me. “Get your ass over there right now before I drag you there myself.”

I clenched my fists at his words, my body stiff and braced for an attack. I was prepared to fight. I would fight them but I wasn’t going down for murder. I wasn’t going to let them implicate me in this and walk away freely.

Simon paused then, regarding me with a grim expression. The obscenity in his eyes had always been there, especially when he’d looked at me when I first came to Dreamhaven. He’d acted on those filthy thoughts a few times until I’d gone on the offensive. But I saw now that he was not going to leave me alone so easily this time. They were taking me out of the picture anyway. Nothing would happen to him if he added another incident to the mix.

Two shots rang out then loud and clear and there was a thump as Patrick Walton’s body slumped to the floor.

We all stared at it, at the blood oozing out of his chest and starting to pool on the ground. I felt like throwing up and backed into a wall, trying to get away from the sight.

For a moment, seeing his body like that, the blood, death up close, it brought back my childhood. It took me back to that room when my mother lay dead in front of me, her own blood staining the rug. Before she was joined by the man responsible for so many difficulties I was to face later in life, as if what he had unleashed on me hadn't been enough.

I slid down to the ground, drawing up my knees and hugging them, my eyes seeing the dead body on the floor of the warehouse but my mind not really taking in the reality of it. It felt like I was ten years old again. Alone. Afraid. Unprotected. And confused.

“I didn't have the patience to wait,” I heard a man speak from far away. “Simon, take care of this mess. Rodney, you too. Come, William. We have other business to take care of. It wouldn't have had to come to this if he'd just handed me the shares.”

“I hope Alexander will keep his end of the deal. I arranged a meeting with him for later at his house but I think it would be better to get out of here and meet him on home turf,” another voice said, both of their footsteps fading away.

A hand gripped my hair then, the pain not strong enough to penetrate the fog in my mind. What was going to happen to me now? Will the police come and take me away? Will the paramedics come? Should I run to the neighbor's house? Will they know that I killed my father? Where will I go? Who will take care of me?

“Hold his mouth open,” a familiar, frigid voice said from above me as he dragged me to a kneeling position by the hair.

“Make sure I don’t get bitten. I’ve wanted to do this for ages. Finally fucking got a chance.”

Another man laughed in response and footsteps came closer to me. Someone in a uniform. Was it the police? Were they going to arrest me? Will they know I used the poison my mom had hidden to murder someone? I didn’t want to go to jail. I was just a kid.

“I always knew you were a faggot, Simon,” the man in the uniform said.

“Shut up, Rodney. I’m not a faggot. I just want to teach this one a lesson. Look the fuck away and hold his jaw open properly.

Someone pushed his fingers inside my mouth, making me jump and hands pried open my jaw. I tried to back away but there was a wall behind me and two pairs of thick thighs in front, men holding me down. No sound came out when I felt like screaming and protesting. I clawed at the uniformed man’s hands but he backhanded me once across the face before forcing my mouth open again.

I heard a sound just near my head, like flesh rubbing against flesh, a sick, insistent stroking and then something touched my face and I began to tremble, wishing I could get swallowed up by the wall.

*No!* My mind screamed but my throat wouldn’t cooperate.

“Hold the fuck still, boy,” the man touching my face with his penis said and slowly, I began to comprehend who it was.

I drifted back to the present but by then he had pushed his dick inside my mouth and I gagged at the intrusion, trying to

move away and close my mouth at the same time but Rodney, the cop, held my jaw firmly until it hurt and my muscles stretched painfully.

“Fuck, yes,” Simon growled above me, his dick crowding my mouth, pushing a few times in consistent jerks while I wriggled my legs and moved my upper body away. He pulled my hair then, making me wince and tears streamed down my cheeks, my chest rising and falling erratically.

“Swallow it all down now, that’s a good boy,” Simon groaned and liquid spurted out of his dick and down my throat. I gagged again, trying to spit it out but that’s when he pulled out and snapped my jaw closed, forcing me to keep it inside and swallow it all. I spluttered while pushing him away and he let me go at last. Let me fall to the floor on my hands and knees, gasping and panting, retching, unable to see clearly due to my blurred vision.

“I’d fuck him too but we don’t have a lot of time. Gotta clean up this mess and take the body back to Dreamhaven along with his car. Make it look like the boy did it,” Simon said, pressing the heel of his boot down on my ass. “Fucker wouldn’t come to meet Scott there but he showed up in a goddamned warehouse, the arrogant prick. He thought we wouldn’t be able to do shit to him in his territory.”

I shook with silent sobs as I listened to him, completely defeated, unable to fully come to terms with what just happened to me and why.

“Come on,” Simon barked. “We’ll deal with him later. The boy’s not going anywhere. Not after that.”

Rodney chuckled and followed him over to where Patrick's dead body was, the one I tore my eyes away from because it brought back too many horrible memories. My stomach was hurting so much and I wasn't sure if it was stress or anxiety. I just wanted to wash the taste of him from my mouth.

They were going to frame me for this murder, I reminded myself while slowly moving to a sitting position and wiping my tongue on the sleeve of my t-shirt. I was always going to be known as the boy who murdered Patrick Walton. He was Rhys' grandfather. I don't know why that thought stood out in my brain but I was kind of glad it did because thinking about Rhys brought me back to who he was. How I had always seen him as the guy who never knew how to treat Paige well. The guy I always wanted to punch.

And the reason for that was her.

I needed to see her. I needed to get to her somehow and let her know what was going on. She would help me. She was the only one who would believe me and stand by me.

Simon and Rodney were busy placing the corpse in a body bag and cleaning up the mess. I eyed the warehouse entrance while observing them both and tried to analyze how long it would take for me to reach the door and run. I couldn't drive but I knew how to run. I'd chased after horses on the farm so many times. I could do this. I could escape and then go find Paige.

Ask her to run away with me tonight. We didn't have time. There was no more time left for us.

I made myself get to my feet and steel my body, prepare myself for the marathon of my life. Only one of them would

chase after me and not even for long because they still had to clean up this murder and get rid of the two vehicles parked outside. This place wasn't too private or abandoned and if they left the task to come back to later, there might be problems.

I could hide if necessary since there were a lot of buildings connected to each other, lots of containers and shipping crates and then the thick bushes on the slope by the road. I could do this because staying here meant sure doom.

So I wasted no more time and took off, running past the men and heading straight for the door, ignoring their startled shouts and taking a sharp turn to the right as I exited the warehouse and disappeared in the darkened space beside it. He'd have to chase me by foot because the spaces were narrow here and the vehicles wouldn't fit.

I heard footsteps further behind me and a shout to stop accompanied by some threats but I ran until my lungs burned and legs screamed, never stopping, determined to leave this place behind and get to safety. Adrenaline was bursting through me, the need to survive overriding my fear. Paige, I needed to get to Paige. To Dreamhaven. She must be waiting for me. I had to see her even if it meant running all the way there. It would take me at least half an hour to reach the farm.

Rodney wouldn't just leave Simon all alone to do all the dirty work. He'd stop chasing me and return to the warehouse when he realized I had outrun him. And I was going to take a chance that Dreamhaven would be the last place they would think to look for me. I was going to have to count on the fact that they would assume I had gone somewhere else to hide, away from the farm instead of walking straight into danger.



They didn't know about me and Paige yet. They wouldn't be able to figure out where I went at first and that could be my one advantage. At least till I saw her and let her know what had happened.

It was all that kept me going. Whatever happened in the warehouse with Scott and Simon was pushed to the back of my mind as I ran through the forest in the night, not daring to stop for a breather until I was as far away from the crime scene as I could get without running out of energy.





## Chapter Thirty-Four

### Paige

It sucked that Rhys was the one who had to drive me back home again. I considered calling an Uber like I'd planned to do earlier with Oliver if he hadn't ditched me but it was quite late so I grudgingly accepted Rhys' offer.

Thankfully, he turned back as soon as he dropped me off so I didn't have to endure his company any longer. Somehow, I'd managed to let go and have fun with my friends tonight. I'd danced with different guys and hung out with the girls. Rayne had left early for some reason and I didn't really think much of it because I'd been having a great time on my own. But after an hour, even I was done.

I thought about not going to check on Oliver and ignoring him just like he had ignored me tonight but then, I was also in a hell of a mood and was hungry for confrontation so I decided to head to the barn. I was so ready to give him a piece of my mind, to tell him exactly what I thought of his behaviour and that he was mistaken if he thought I was going to put up with it.

I heard a familiar voice as soon as I entered the stables and came to a halt, frowning up at the darkened loft where it was coming from.

“Hey, I’m here okay. Whatever it is that you need, Oliver, I can help you with it. When you’re ready, just write it down for me.”

It was Rayne. My best friend was up there with my boyfriend and speaking to him in that soothing, sweet voice with the fucking lights out. What the hell? He’d ditched me tonight and was sitting up there all cozy in his loft with her?

It pissed me off even more until I felt like ripping something to shreds and I climbed up the ladder with a fierce mindset, determined to give him hell over this and not even care if Rayne finally found out that I was with him. I’d told her to stay away so many times. And he *knew* how I felt about him getting close to her. Yet here they were, making my worst fears come true.

In the dim lighting which came from downstairs, the sight that met my eyes once I stood in the loft burned through me like a poisonous flame. Her arms were around him and he was taking her comfort like it was the most natural thing in the world. They weren’t doing anything else, just holding each other, her more than him but I hated them both in that moment. He wasn’t supposed to do that. He wasn’t supposed to touch my best friend like that behind my back. Not after standing me up.

“Oliver.” I bit out his name in a way I had never said it before and switched on the lights, making them jump and move apart quickly.

He lifted his head, something like relief crossing his expression but I was in no mood for his games.

“What the hell is she doing here?” I demanded, stepping away when he got up to approach me.

“Paige, listen-”

“Is *this* why you came back early, Rayne?” I asked her angrily. “So you could make a play for my boyfriend when I wasn’t around?”

She gave me a confused look before looking from me to Oliver and then back, opening and closing her mouth. I stared her down, hating her presence around him and she finally gathered her wits enough to ask, “You two are actually dating?”

I lifted my chin and answered, “Yes. We are. And I would really appreciate it if you didn’t keep showing up whenever he’s alone.”

She was shaking her head at me. “Paige, why wouldn’t you tell me?” she asked. “Why would you-?”

“It’s none of your business okay. It was between me and Oliver. Now please go. I need to be alone with him.”

Rayne frowned at me before saying, “I didn’t know okay. I didn’t believe you were with him even when Rhys kept implying it. The way you treated him made it hard for me to believe it. I just came over to hang out and found him looking really upset-”

“So?” I shot back at her heatedly, folding my arms. “Like you haven’t seen him upset a thousand times before. Big deal.”

“As his friend...his only friend, yes, it *is* a big deal for me, Paige.”

“Jesus, Rayne, just go away, all right? I don’t want you here right now. Oliver and I need some time alone.”

She didn’t move, instead choosing to look at my boyfriend and ask, “Is that okay, Oliver? Do you want to be alone with her?”

I gaped at her rudeness, feeling my blood boil at her implication. “He’s my fucking boyfriend, Rayne! When I tell you to leave us alone, you leave us alone.”

She looked back at me calmly, almost pitifully because I knew Rayne didn’t have it in her to be mean. “I know you, Paige and I know you have a tendency to hurt people’s feelings. Oliver is my friend and he’s upset so I just want to make sure that leaving him with you is the best idea given your behaviour in the past.”

I scoffed at her, my anger increasing to its peak then but it was Oliver who walked towards Rayne, placed his hand on her shoulders and mouthed, ‘It’s okay. I’ll be okay.’”

I gaped at them both and noted the look of utter surprise on my friend’s face. Of course she would be. He had never actually tried to speak to *anyone* that way before. I was the only one and now he had done it with her. It made me see red. I’d told him that I was insecure about Rayne so many times and he wanted to treat her like she was special right in front of me.

Rayne gave me a serious look and said, “Please be good to him.”

I just glared at her, knowing I would tell her off really bad if she didn’t stop being so nosy and possessive but she touched

Oliver's cheek, gave him a sweet smile and left.

He finally turned to me, his face and arms dirty and scratched, and his clothes torn and muddy. What the fuck had he been up to? But then he was here relaxing with her in his fucking loft without me so the last thing I wanted was to hear his stupid excuses.

Maybe Rhys had a point. Maybe the whole deal with Oliver was that he was trying to make me feel lesser than I was. Maybe he really wanted to teach me a lesson. Being aware of how I felt about him and Rayne and allowing her to hold him like that? Would they even have stopped if I hadn't shown up?

"I thought I told you to stay away from her," I gritted out coldly but he ignored me and walked over to his desk, picking up a note and handing it to me, begging me with his eyes to read it. There was an urgency in his demeanour now but *I didn't care*.

I was not interested in hearing or *reading* one damn excuse until I'd made it clear to him that this was the last time he got to treat me like this. So I took the paper from him and crumbled it in my hand before tossing it away. Just out of spite.

Oliver glanced at the ball of paper and looked back at me with a distraught expression before going over to pick it up and bringing it back to me, pressing it into my hand and mouthing, 'Please read it.'

I gave him an uncaring look and tossed it away again, almost starting to enjoy it. Enjoy the powerful feeling that surged through me, knowing that I was making him beg me for something now after his behaviour tonight.

He frowned at me but it wasn't an angry one. It was a look of exasperation before he stalked back to his desk to pick up his phone and then came back to me to hold it near my face, showing me that his battery had died. What a lame excuse. His battery hadn't been dead an hour ago when I'd been trying to get in touch. This bastard.

I removed the stupid phone from his hand and simply hurled it out the window behind me, determined to teach him a lesson. I could always get him another. *If* he was good to me. Oliver opened his mouth in a gasp and stared at me with accusation but I held my ground. What I had to say was more important right now and he better hear me out instead of feeding me pathetic excuses after I caught him with my best friend.

“Just because I was sweet to you and loved you, it doesn't mean that you get to treat me like a fucking doormat,” I stated firmly.

He began shaking his head, the way he did when he was frustrated and wanted to disagree with me but I placed my hand on his shoulders to make him go still and pinned him with an unwavering look.

“When I say I don't want to see you anywhere near Rayne, I mean it, Oliver. And when you aren't able to keep your promises to me, you let me know ahead of time,” I maintained, needing to drive this into his brain. “I won't just stand by and be that girl who cries when a boy is suddenly unable to make time for her because he's trying to teach her a lesson of his own.”



Oliver brought his hands up and pushed my arms away from him, glaring at me in irritation. I squinted at him, not backing down a bit.

“Oh so you liked having Rayne’s arms around you just now but suddenly, you can’t bear my touch?” I shot at him.

Gripping his hair suddenly, he marched over to the desk again and grabbed the pen and notepad I had given him. As he stood there and scribbled something with trembling hands, I went to him and swiped the notepad from his hands before flinging it down to the stables. Oliver shot me a fierce look and appeared as though he actually wanted to hit me.

I glared back, suddenly daring him to try. If he did it, if he finally lost his good boy front and showed me who he really was, then this would be over quicker than I had imagined. If Rhys turned out to be right, this was the only way to find out. By pushing him to the limit and seeing exactly what he was capable of doing to me in anger. If that fire of revenge really did burn as deep as my ex believed.

“What?” I demanded. “What do you want to do to me? Do you want to hit me? Do you think that just because I’m in a relationship with you and gave you a little bit of control over me, you can treat me however you want? Huh?” I pushed at his chest then, even though he didn’t budge. “What is it, Oliver? I was mean to you before as well and yet, you never wanted to hurt me back. So what’s changed? A few fucks here and there and you think you’re the man of the house? That you can act like an animal with me?”

The way he was looking at me was dangerously close to hatred and I couldn’t stand it. One fight. One fight and

confrontation where I knew my feelings were justified but he wanted his word to be above everything. He wanted me to feel sorry for him and cater to whatever he was going through. Like he'd been the one who had to face humiliation from an ex over being ditched. It was obvious from his sweaty, exhausted appearance that he'd just been at the farm and working late and hadn't wanted to go to Cedarfield with me..

“You could have sent me one fucking text!” I screamed and suddenly, his hands gripped my arms and pressed me so hard against the wall, I let out a huff at the contact.

“Paige,” he mouthed, his expression anguished and helpless. ‘I need your help.’

“I don't fucking care!” I yelled and pushed him away. “I don't care what you need, Oliver! You're not some kid who can't for once just stand up for himself and do things without needing a girl to fix your problems for you. Like Rayne always does. Like you let her.”

He came at me again and screwed up his features, staring into my eyes and begging me to listen.

But I wasn't going to. If we were to move forward, he needed to validate my feelings too. He needed to realize that if I was standing up for myself, he didn't get to make me melt for him and give in every time. This was going to set the pattern for our future and he needed to know that.

“Don't touch me,” I slapped his hands away and pushed him back again. “If you need me so badly then what the fuck were you doing sitting on your bed touching my best friend?”

He let out a rough exhale and ran his hands through his hair again, his eyes going a little wild as he walked into me and... and...put his arms around me.

I was more than a little stunned. He just stood there and was holding me as if he was trying to calm us both down even though he seemed more upset than I was.

I didn't want to care about that either but it was hard not to when he held me so gently for a long while and then started rubbing my back. My anger hadn't cooled down but I couldn't stop my own hands from wrapping around his hard back and pressing my body tightly against his.

I didn't know what it was. Fighting with him like this, getting all riled up and then the sudden contact with his body after not touching him all day... But I started to feel turned on. Which was the last thing I needed because I didn't want to let him have the upper hand.

Having sex with a guy during a fight wasn't supposed to solve stuff, right? But all my brain computed in that moment was that I was hugging my boyfriend, angry and a little horny and jealous and he was being good to me for some reason.

He wasn't lashing out like I'd expected him to. He was being good and so patient. It made me glance up at his face with a little bit of my love showing because I couldn't hold it back anymore. Oliver returned my look but with tears glistening in his eyes which sent a pang through my heart. Feeling extremely overwhelmed with emotions, I leaned up to give him a kiss but he turned his face away.

I froze. The way he avoided my kiss was exactly like he used to do before. When he didn't trust me. When he didn't think I

was worthy of it.

My lungs seemed to empty of air for a second and I cupped his cheek in disbelief, bringing his mouth back to mine before trying to kiss him again.

He resisted by drawing back and turning his chin a little to the side.

My jaw went slack at his stubbornness. I hated him in that moment. So this was his game. Not aggressive or hurtful in a violent manner but this.

This was his method of revenge. To mess with my feelings and make me think that I wasn't good enough to kiss him.

"Fuck you, Oliver," I whispered and tried to push him away but he wouldn't let go.

He was screwing me up inside with this kind of back and forth.

"Let me go. I want to go home."

He only held me tighter and shook his head, that earnest look back in his eyes before he lowered his face to my neck.

I held still, not realizing what he was doing at first but then I felt him dragging down my panties. I didn't move as he let them drop to the floor and placed his hand on my pussy, sending a shock of lust through me.

My eyes closed and my head dropped back against the wall at his touch. I wound my fingers in his hair, losing myself to the sensations like I always did with him. Moaning slightly as my desire grow stronger, I turned my face towards his and

tried to capture his lips with mine again, needing to kiss him so bad.

And instead of letting me do it, he frowned at me, gave me a firm shake of his head and avoided my kiss for the third time that night.

But then he continued to finger me and grind against me, his other hand coming up to cup my breasts before his thumb began working on my nipple.

“What the hell is wrong with you, Oliver?” I hissed at him but he didn’t try to mouth anything this time.

Instead, he kept sliding his fingers inside me rhythmically until I was wet while tugging at my nipples and making me let out a groan.

“Fuck, stop,” I whispered as he unzipped himself.

If he wasn’t even interested in kissing me anymore, then why the hell was I allowing him to do this to me? Was I really this weak?

The head of his dick was nudging my pussy now and I gasped at the pleasurable contact but I still wanted to show him that this wasn’t going to work. It was all or nothing right? I wanted all of him.

“Kiss me, Oliver, please,” I begged softly with tears in my eyes and he clenched his jaw and shook his head again, breaking my heart slowly.

His eyes were full of pain but he was still trying to push inside me and refusing to give me the one thing I wanted. The one thing he didn’t easily like to give. His lips.

“Then stop touching me,” I told him furiously. “If you can’t even give me a kiss, then why are you trying to screw me? I don’t want it.”

He ignored my words and thrust once, holding me to the wall with his eyes tightly closed now.

“Oliver, stop. Stop, okay,” I said firmly even as I kept moving my hips to take more of him in because it felt good down there. It always felt so good with him.

He buried his face in my neck again and thrust harder until he was balls deep inside me. His ignorance and my own pathetic response made me feel so outraged that I pulled his head up by the hair, gripping it painfully and gave him a hard slap.

Oliver jerked at the assault and gave me a shocked look before pulling out of me abruptly.

We stared at each other, unable to understand each other at all. I knew that was where we were at the moment. There was no harmony between us. Nothing was in sync. Nothing felt right. He seemed to be absolutely stunned that I had slapped him. There was anger simmering in his eyes as well and I couldn’t stand being on the other end of it.

He’d just tried to force himself on me when I told him to stop. What did that mean? Why would he do that? I would never have believed it of Oliver but it was so confusing to me. His behaviour was so confusing to me and I didn’t have the patience to try and figure him out anymore.

Everything was going wrong. Him not showing up tonight. Him being here with Rayne. Him not letting me kiss him.

None of it was okay and it made me hate him. Hate us. I felt sick thinking about what had just happened.

I put my face in my hands and cried, unable to deal with him anymore. Unable to stand the sight of him. Everything about him irritated me. From his stupid disability because of which we couldn't even have a sane, normal conversation to his mood swings and ways of dealing with his problems.

And now he had gone too far. Hadn't he? This wasn't okay at all. Even if he'd stopped and pulled out when he realized I really meant it, it didn't make what he did okay. Revenge didn't seem like his method but for a moment there, he had appeared not to care about me at all and that broke my heart so bad.







## Chapter Thirty-Five

### Oliver

I straightened my clothes and backed away from Paige when she started to cry. Turning around in a sort of haze, I went over to the opposite wall, placing my forehead against it and trying to breathe through the jumbled mess my emotions had become. My mind, my body, my feelings, everything was all over the place. Jarring. Disconsolate.

I didn't know what was wrong with me. I'd been trying to tell her everything and she was being so stubborn and callous. I tried so hard, so many times and she did the same thing she had been doing to me for years whenever I had wanted to tell her something. She became a bully.

She went back to the Paige Hamilton who couldn't find anything to love about me. After everything we had shared, after what I had been through tonight, having her revert to her old ways and taking advantage of my disability to show me her power made me want to hate her.

But I couldn't, of course. I couldn't hate this girl. My head was aching and the muscles in my legs burned from having run all that distance. I was tired, angry and so discouraged that she wasn't giving me a chance to explain.

I thought I could text her and let her know what had happened but upon reaching here, I'd discovered that my phone had switched off. Instead of wasting time charging it, I'd written Paige a note explaining everything and intending to give it to her but then Rayne had arrived, saying she just wanted to check up on me and I'd found out that Paige had gone to the prom after all. With Rhys Walton.

Rayne had become so worried when she saw the state I was in but instead of confiding in her or borrowing her phone to text Paige, I'd just sat there terrified, not even sure whom I could trust anymore.

And yet, I had tried to put my faith in her love for me and get a hold of myself for her. Tried to comfort her so that she could calm down enough to finally hear me out. That was all I'd meant to do even if inside I was filled with fear and feeling so fucked up.

How could I let her kiss me after what Simon did to me? I'd rinsed out my mouth as soon as I'd reached the barn but that didn't make the memory of it go away. I couldn't kiss her with that same mouth so soon after getting assaulted by him.

And she wasn't interested in what I had to tell her but she'd liked the feeling of my body pressed to hers. Liked it enough to get that drowsy look in her eyes which she got whenever she wanted sex.

That had been the last thing on my mind but I did it because I thought it might make her happy enough to finally let go of her anger and let me explain myself.

It was just one of those things that happened and it was purely physical. My heart hadn't been in it and when I didn't

kiss her, I knew hers had been hurt too. But being inside Paige always felt incredible. She'd been wet. She'd wanted me.

It was confusing to hear her tell me no and not even sounding certain about it. I'd assumed she was saying it out of anger or nastiness because I wouldn't kiss her. But she was taking me in willingly so I kept going until she slapped me.

Her response had floored me.

Just a couple of hours ago, someone had gripped my hair like that and backhanded me across the face before assaulting me and now the girl I loved had done it too. I get that it was because she really had wanted me to stop but it still hurt.

There was so much anguish inside me. My mind was so loud. Aggravated and cursing everything in existence.

All that I had planned, all of it was going to be ruined because I didn't handle this well. How was I going to explain anything to her now?

How was I going to make her understand what kind of storm was brewing inside me? The injustice of this world, my cursed tongue, my inability to tackle this new trauma, her coldness and bullying.

All of it meshed together to break me down and I stood there and cried hot, angst-ridden tears. I cried with her and prayed for more time. More time for us to be able to sort this out.

Help. I just wanted someone help me. To help me be better. To be *normal*, for fuck's sake.

I sniffed and rubbed at my eyes, sobbing uncontrollably now, the way she was doing, except I didn't make a sound.

*Paige. Would it have killed you to have read my note? Would it have killed you to just stop and acknowledge that I was in real pain and needed you of all people to support me?*

Cruel visions of her thwarting my every attempt to tell her what happened tonight clawed at me. Bully. She was still nothing but a bully deep down.

She had been right that day in the orchard. I should never have trusted her with myself.

I wasn't like Rhys or any other regular guy she could have dated. It was hard for me to make people understand what was in my head and I thought she knew that. I thought she finally understood the difficulties I had to deal with on a daily basis simply due to my speechlessness.

But she would never get it. People who didn't have to suffer through this would never learn the frustration and efforts it took to be heard. And be seen. It was all so easy for them. For her. To open her mouth and say whatever she wanted to me while shutting me up in every way.

I cried harder as I fell down the rabbit hole of self-pity. It was like the floodgates had opened and I couldn't stop. I couldn't stop my mind breaking those dams and letting all the monstrous thoughts in. I couldn't fucking stop and it felt like I was finally losing it.

When I heard footsteps coming up the ladder, I didn't even bother to look up at whoever had entered. I was so far gone into my head, nothing made sense anymore. It felt numbing and agonizing all at once.

“What the fuck is going on here?” I heard Scott’s voice say and still, I didn’t turn to look at him.

I didn’t have the presence of mind to answer him or acknowledge his question in any way or even think about what he would do to me after tonight.

“Paige, what’s wrong?” he demanded brusquely.

More footsteps approached and voices drifted up the ladder, talking amongst themselves.

“What the fuck did you do to her?” Scott roared suddenly and it sounded like he was addressing me but I didn’t move or turn to face him.

“Honey. Honey, come here,” he lowered his tone to reveal his concern and I heard her sniffing and crying harder in response.

Well at least she had her father’s comfort. I was glad she had that because I couldn’t give her any at the moment.

And then she voiced her next words and it was like a sharp needle bursting the bubble I had placed myself in. A spear lodging itself through my chest when I had been least expecting it.

“He raped me, Daddy,” she told her father with a soft sob. “He...he put his hands on me. I kept saying no but he wouldn’t listen.”

I turned to look at her then, my eyes seeking out hers, wondering if there was any other possible way she could wound me more than she already had. Trying to look into those treacherous eyes and show her that I wasn’t even

shocked by what she said. Devastated, yes. Broken, definitely. But not shocked.

*Thank you for all the love you gave me so far, I wanted to tell her when she finally looked straight at me, appearing stunned. Contrite even.*

*Too late, Paige Hamilton. You just sealed my fate with those words. Like you always did because words are a privilege to you and abusing them was something you always loved to do. I was the idiot for believing you could ever change.*

The blow came a second later. Scott's fist on my jaw followed by his order for someone to take Paige away as he attacked me and I lay there and took it, wanting to be broken until there was nothing left anymore. Until I didn't have to hurt like this anymore.

Twice, I got kicked in the stomach, then in the face and Scott yelled curses at me while threatening me with his worst.

"Dad, no. Don't-"

Her voice was cut off as she got dragged away while more men came at me, pulling me up to a standing position even though I was too weak to remain upright.

"Of all the places you could have gone to after you ran from us...", Simon's voice growled in my ear while his fist squeezed my neck. "...you decided to come back here. Could you be more stupid?"

"He's getting what's coming to him," Scott rasped at me and pushed me against the wall so that my head banged into the wood, grinding my face into it. "I'll make the rest of your life a living hell, boy, I fucking swear it."

My cuts and bruises stung but the wounds inside ached the most. They screamed to be given relief. Too long. This had gone on for too long.

That heavy thing inside my chest was forcing itself up again. The thing I had always tried to control. The men jerked me towards the ladder, holding my hands behind me so I couldn't even place them over my mouth this time.

I was pushed down and kicked again before they dragged me out of the barn and the entire time, I fought.

Not against them but against that thing in my chest. The one that didn't want to be suffocated anymore.

It became stronger than me. I pushed down on it so hard and all the way to the truck they hauled me to until I couldn't. Until I knew it was hopeless.

It wasn't going to listen to me anymore. It had become some sort of unstoppable force and finally, it demanded to be heard.







## Chapter Thirty-Six

### Paige

I was leaning against the door, crying my eyes out and begging my mother to let me out of the room when it filled the air.

A sound I had never heard before in my life.

It was both feral and desperate. Anguished and freeing. A cry for help. A cry for justice and reckoning. A loud, primordial scream like some deeply wounded animal who wanted the world to know that nothing was going to keep it down. And that it had had enough. That this was not the end.

But at the same time, that scream was saying...

*Help me.*

It ripped at my heart until that organ inside my chest felt shredded to bits.

I rushed to my window then, watching as my father, Simon and another man, a cop whose name I didn't remember, dragged Oliver to the truck while regarding him with stunned expressions as that scream came out of his mouth.

He wasn't fighting them. He was just letting his voice erupt through the night, hoarse and untamed at last.

I went back to the door with the overpowering need to fling it open and run to him. I'd made a horrible mistake. I had spoken out of anger and confusion. He would never hurt me. He didn't deserve this.

But Mum had locked me in and I screamed as well, just like Oliver continued to do so outside, despite getting beaten up over and over again.

"Mom, please open the door!" Urgently, fearfully, I slapped my palms on it, crying and shouting to be freed from my prison. "Mom! Open the door, please. I made a mistake. Please!"

Nobody answered me so I hurried back to the window to appeal to my father.

"Daddy, stop. Don't take him please, Dad! *He didn't do anything.* He's innocent!"

I shouted those words hoarsely over and over but the truck had started and nobody paid attention to me.

I watched in shock then as they took him away, my dad's truck roaring off into the night.

"Oliver, I'm sorry," I cried, my face tight and hot with emotions and my limbs so weak.

The torture I was experiencing inside was not even an inch of what he must be feeling though. I did this to him.

I betrayed him.

One last time, I tried to open the door, wrenching at the door knob and slamming my fists on it, yelling for someone to listen to me. Hear me out. Let me explain.

He'd needed me to let him explain too but I hadn't cared.

"He's innocent," I whispered to no one in particular and dropped to my knees, rubbing my eyes with the heels of my palms.

Even though I tried, it was an effort to remain conscious. It was an effort to keep myself from blacking out completely while slumping my head against the door as the stress and shock finally caught up to me and pushed me over the edge into oblivion.





## Chapter Thirty-Seven

### Oliver

The place they took me to didn't seem like any normal prison. They drove with me into the night while I drifted in and out of consciousness. And when morning finally came, arms grabbed me without thought for my injuries and threw me inside a dank cell. Dark and empty. Like I knew my future was going to be.

They kept me there for a whole day without food and just tiny rations of water. It tasted like mud but I drank it anyway because my throat was so parched.

The part of my brain that liked to feel things deeply and think of solutions or dwell on stuff was shut down. I didn't want to go down that road. I didn't want to face that pain again even though at intervals, while sitting there staring at empty walls, the burn of tears was inevitable.

Then at last someone came to my cell door and I looked up grimly, wondering if they had brought food. I thought I had known hunger in my life but it had been nothing compared to this clawing, maddening need to fill my stomach with something, even if it tasted horrible.

The man who entered just picked me up by one arm and walked with me as I limped through dark corridors and passed locked doors, age-old it seemed and decaying. What the hell was this place?

But instead of leading me to a cafeteria, he took me outside to a fenced area and I shut my eyes immediately at the blinding sunlight, wincing when the wind stung my open cuts, making my eyes water.

Suddenly, I was shoved down on the ground but still, I kept my eyes closed, struggling to get up. I heard voices belonging to grown men and when my vision was finally able to adjust to the harsh sunlight, I took a look around and blanched at the group of savage-looking prisoners who surrounded me in the gated enclosure.

I glanced back at my jailer, the one who had brought me here for reasons my foggy brain couldn't comprehend.

“Stand up, boy,” the man said to me with a sneer.

Again. It was happening again. Commands being thrown at me and not even the respect of a name to go with it.

Gritting my teeth, I got to my feet and glared at him, anger surging through my veins.

The man narrowed his eyes at me when he noticed my look.

“I was told you'd be requiring special treatment,” he stated, placing his hands on his hips. “But for that...,” he added, jabbing his finger in front of my face, “...you're going to get *extra* special treatment. Isn't that right, boys?”

A few of the men hummed in agreement while the others grinned and cracked their knuckles in warning.

“Don’t kill him though,” my jailer told them, regarding me with evil simmering in his expression. “He’s going to be the only source of entertainment for you around here from now on so we’ll need him alive for tomorrow.”

He left me amongst the men and when I turned to look at each of them, trying to find mercy in even one of their gazes, I was only met with cruelty and a thirst for violence.

There would be no mercy here. I understood that now.

Slowly, resolutely, I began to mask the reality of my situation. In order to deal with the harsh circumstances of my present, I began to visualize myself in a different existence far off in the future where people like me were able to rise above their pain and hurdles, where we weren’t weak or oppressed.

I was going to make *that* my reality from now on.

Because I planned on getting out of here.

I planned on taking back what was stolen from me. Ripping the ground out from under their feet until they didn’t know what had hit them.

One by one, each of those men who had preyed upon my helplessness would pay.

*And so would she.*

...

*Life is a storm, my young friend. You will bask in the sunlight one moment, be shattered on the rocks the next. What makes you a man is what you do when that storm comes.*

- Alexandre Dumas (The Count of Monte Cristo)



## Playlist

Linkin Park : Somewhere I Belong

Linkin Park : Numb

Taylor Swift : Love Story

Linkin Park : From The Inside

One Republic : Apologize

Full playlist available on my YouTube channel : [The Stable Boy\\_\(Dreamhaven Duet #1\)](#)

## Author's Note

Just for further clarification, while writing this duet, I aim to represent disability and create awareness regarding how different types of trauma whether emotional, physical or mental can impair a person. The second book will also feature this theme but in a different context. If you wish to broaden your knowledge regarding mutism, I have included a link to the source material below which you can check out if you want.

[Source and info on Mutism](#)

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My wonderful readers who look forward to every release and click that preorder button as soon as I post a link, man, I love you guys.

## Author Info

For updates on Book 2 of the Dreamhaven Duet, you can check out my Insta

[@datcrazywriter\\_](#) (Zee Shine Storm)

I'm also pretty active on Goodreads.

## Other Books by Zee Shine Storm

### **FORBIDDEN series books**

'Forbidden' (Book 0.5 - prequel. Jasmine's story.)

'Three's A Crowd' (Book 1).

'Once A Cheater' (Book 2).

'Twice Inflamed' (Book 3).

'Taming Wells' (Book 3.5 - A Jasper Wells novella).

'Shameless' (Book 4 - Ziad's story).

'Wicked' (Book 5 - Jacob's story).

## **Stand-alones**

[Dirty Secrets](#) (Chick-lit, contemporary, NA, sister's fiancé)

[Girl Obsessed - A Dark Romance](#)

[Ride Or Die \(A Girl Obsessed novella\)](#)